

NBA Preview

Double Issue
October 26, 2015
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SI's
Surefire
Finals Pick
Cavs vs.
Thunder
P. 64

THE STUDENT
Karl-Anthony Towns

Prepare To Get **SCHOOLED**

THE MENTOR
Kevin Garnett

The Education
Of the Game's Next
Generation Begins

by Lee Jenkins P. 42

PLUS

**Miracle
(and Heartbreak)**

In the Big House

By Michael Rosenberg

P. 34

**40 Years
After Game 6**

*How Reds-Red Sox
Changed Sports Forever*

By Tom Verducci

P. 104

A man with dark hair and a beard is sitting on a green metal stool against a rustic brick wall. He is wearing a grey sweater over a pink collared shirt, dark jeans, and brown leather boots. The scene is lit with warm, natural light, creating a cozy and stylish atmosphere.

MAKING FASHION LOOK
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— HAS NEVER BEEN —

SO

EASY

— THE CASEY CHUKKA —



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+ THEY'RE THE 1

Russell Westbrook's hand is healed, a big reason SI is picking OKC to win the West.

PHOTOGRAPH BY

Greg Nelson for Sports Illustrated



SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS THIS WEEK:

Todd Rosenberg for Sports Illustrated (Timberwolves)
Jeffery A. Salter for Sports Illustrated (Heat)
Robert Seale for Sports Illustrated (Spurs)
Andrew D. Bernstein for Sports Illustrated (Lakers)



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1975 World Series

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SI NOW

WITH HOST
MAGGIE GRAY



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ERIC LEGRAND The 25-year-old former Rutgers defensive tackle, who was paralyzed during a game against Army in 2010, talks about his recovery and his life today.

MAGGIE GRAY: *It's been five years since your spinal cord injury. Tell us about some of the progress you have made in that time.*

ERIC LEGRAND: Things have been great for me. I am very fortunate and very blessed. I'm still in therapy three times a week, working my butt off. I've been working with the Christopher Reeve Foundation, which is partnered

with my foundation, Team LeGrand. I've been able to work on a NeuroRecovery Network treadmill. I've done over 500 sessions on it, and it has helped me to regain so much movement: From my trunk extensions to my back to lifting up my arms, to moving around, dancing and doing the Shimmy Shake. It's helped me so much to be able to

"It's not always easy, but the discipline of football prepared me for this."

—Eric LeGrand

go through all those therapy sessions and improve. It's been five years. It's been a grind. It's not always easy and it's not always fun, but I would say the discipline of football prepared me for this. Back then I was always in the weight room or in practice or in class; always focused. Now I just put that focus toward my therapy.

MG: *What have you learned about yourself in the last five years?*

EL: I've learned that I actually have some patience. I never had much patience before this happened. But now I'm in a situation where I have to have patience. But with everything that has been going on with spinal cord injury research, it gets me amped up. It's like, "Get out there! Get your life going!" □

For more of LeGrand's interview, plus the SI Now archive, go to SI.com/sinow

TUNE IN



▶ **EPISODE: OCT. 12**

Former NFL wide receiver **Torry Holt** discusses his transition to high school football coach



▶ **EPISODE: OCT. 13**

What will be the legacy of former South Carolina coach **Steve Spurrier**?



▶ **EPISODE: OCT. 14**

Former Redskins QB **Mark Rypien** talks about his old team's search for a top QB



▶ **EPISODE: OCT. 15**

Screenwriter **Bob Gale** reveals the link between his movie *Back to the Future II* and sports gambling

BRYAN BEDDER/GETTY IMAGES FOR SAMSUNG (LEGRAND); AL MISSES/SHUTTERSTOCK (HOLT); SCOTT HALLERAN/GETTY IMAGES (SPURRIER); JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (RYPHEN); MILOPO/GETTY IMAGES (BALLS); BET NOIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MONEY)

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MURPHY'S AWE

On Sunday, Murphy added Arrieta to his impressive list of postseason homer victims: Clayton Kershaw (twice), Zack Greinke and Lester.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CHUCK SOLOMON
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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**Leading
Off**

AT THE MLB PLAYOFFS

October Blues

BY BEN REITER

If you are to the North Side of Chicago born, the Curse of the Billy Goat has likely loomed over you all your life. A recap for the uninitiated: In 1945 the Cubs, trying to win their first World Series since 1908, kicked a man named Billy Sianis out of Wrigley Field, allegedly due to the aroma of the pet goat he'd brought with him. "Them Cubs, they ain't gonna win no more!" exclaimed the enraged tavern owner, as the story goes. Of course, they haven't.

This fall the Cubs are once more within dreaming distance of a championship. It was on the eve of the NLCS, against the Mets, that the Curse of the Billy Goat metamorphosed into something even more sinister.

Someone pointed out that the name of Sianis's unwashed caprine friend was Murphy. Then *The Wall Street Journal's* Jared Diamond pieced together a history of Cubbies-thwarting forces bearing that name. The widely despised owner of the 1908 club, still the last to win a Series? Charles Murphy. The GM of the Mets in 1969, when New York overtook the Cubs for the NL East crown, despite trailing by nine games as late as Aug. 16? Johnny Murphy. The Mets' announcer that year? Bob Murphy. The ballpark in which Chicago lost the decisive game in the '84 NLCS? Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego. And, finally, the name of the hero of the Mets' just-completed NLDS against the Dodgers? Daniel Murphy.

The Murphy Corollary had been diagnosed *before* that last Murphy transformed into a certified Cubs killer. In Game 1 of the NLCS last Saturday, the traditionally adequate 30-year-old second



PRICE HIKE

Blue Jays ace Price was cruising in Game 2 until the seventh, when the Royals erupted for five runs in a 6-3 victory.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DILIP VISHWANAT
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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**Leading
Off**

AT THE MLB PLAYOFFS

baseman hit a first-inning homer—his third bomb in three games—to open the scoring against lefty Jon Lester, and then made a diving stop with two outs in the bottom of the ninth to seal the 4-2 victory. In Game 2, Murphy hit another first-inning blast, this one a two-run job off Cy Young candidate Jake Arrieta, propelling New York to a 3-0 lead and a 4-1 win.

A belief in curses often takes hold this time of year. While Chicago's fan base is the most tortured, none of the other three teams still playing have won the Fall Classic since the Blue Jays did it, in 1993. The Mets' last title was in '86, the Royals' in '85.

Each city has a hex or two of its own. Toronto has the creatively named Toronto Sports Curse, as well as the Taylor Swift Curse. (Her appearances preceded nosedives by teams in three MLB cities this season, and she had a Rogers Centre gig in early October.) New York has the Willie Mays Curse and the Mets Bobblehead Curse, among others (many related to Bobby Bonilla). Kansas City has something called the Curse of the Shuttlecocks, but that's not nearly all; a few years ago an alternative local newspaper called *The Pitch* ran a story headlined, **THE ROYALS' 25 BIGGEST CURSES**.

One problem with viewing sports through curse-colored glasses is that it overlooks the existence of simple statistical variance. A bigger concern is that it minimizes the agency of the human beings playing the game. The Royals, for example, have constructed a resilient lineup full of contact hitters, which is how they were able to go up 2-0 in the ALCS. In the seventh inning of a 6-3 victory in Game 2, K.C. rallied for five runs against Jays ace David Price, who had



GRAND STAND

Mets rightfielder Curtis Granderson robbed the Cubs' Chris Coghlan of a likely home run in Game 2, much to the delight of bullpen coach Ricky Bones.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHUCK SOLOMON
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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of
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**Leading
Off**

AT THE MLB PLAYOFFS

given up just one knock through six.

For his part, Daniel Murphy has worked exceedingly hard to become more of a threat at the plate. Under first-year hitting coach Kevin Long, the former gap hitter started pulling balls long before he met the Cubs. "We really started hunting pitches in the middle of the plate and in," Murphy says. "I started getting a little more aggressive, and we talked and found out, *What are my strengths and what are my weaknesses?*" Murphy had never finished with a full-season slugging percentage higher than .448, but over the last two months of the regular season he slugged .538. Through Sunday he was up to .929 in the playoffs.

Identifying baseball curses is the fan's equivalent of mining ancient texts for prophecies of doom. It's an exercise in drawing a bull's-eye around where the target has been hit. Their existence is almost always ultimately disproved; all it takes is time. "I mean, it's got to end sometime, right?" says Lester, of the Cubs' seemingly insidious one. Lester would know. He was a Red Sox farmhand when that organization ended the Curse of the Billy Goat's longtime twin—the Curse of the Bambino—in 2004, and he pitched for Boston's two subsequent champions.

Still, even as old curses die, new ones are born. It has not escaped notice that all four of the remaining teams wear royal blue as their primary color. Are we in the nascent stages of the Curse of Non-Royal Blue? Check back next October. By then, at least one supposedly voodooed fan base will be unburdened—due not to anything metaphysical but to players who, like Murphy, performed at their very best when it mattered most. □

INBOX

FOR OCT. 12, 2015



I thought it was great how honest Greg Bedard was with his take on Baylor defensive end Shawn Oakman. While many writers just say good things, Bedard listed ways Oakman can become a better player.

Russell Finelsen, Fairfax, Va.

+ Oakman, obviously a physically blessed individual who may or may not be maximizing his potential, is still just a kid. He doesn't deserve to be downgraded in a national magazine. Enlighten us with stories of players exceeding their potential.

Curt Andrews, Tulsa



I was Mike Epstein's fraternity brother at Cal in the early 1960s. And I remember that on the wall of his room he hung a very large picture of Ted Williams, in full swing. Mike had added arrows pointing out key body positions in Williams's perfect swing, and Mike would carefully demonstrate how important these details were. I tried unsuccessfully to master his recommendations. Mike, on the other hand, learned the lessons well.

James Waldman, Portland

Despite being a Gentile, I hope David Simon's wonderfully amusing journey of repentance finds an end to the 40-plus years of wandering in the wilderness, and leads him and the Nationals to the Promised Land of championship trophies and rings.

Dallas Johnson, Kulm, N.D.



COVER

The only thing I can add to Tom Verducci's thoroughly researched story on Jays manager John Gibbons is that his baseball career actually started in Canada, in 1970, when his father and I were stationed in Labrador. Even at age eight, John wanted to be a catcher.

Craig Christensen
Monterey, Calif.



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SCORECARD

Call it sour grapes if you want, but for \$303,030 per game pitched this season, Max Scherzer should have thrown a no-hitter every time he took the mound.

Dave Curtis
Bloomfield Hills, Mich.



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POINT AFTER

I share Michael Rosenberg's disgust at the decline of college football rivalries, but that is irrelevant to the problem of MLB's playoff structure. Seed teams based on records rather than reward those in a weak division.

Ken Hartman
Rapid City, S.D.

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Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

SCORECARD

AT THE MLB PLAYOFFS

The Wait of History

The four teams that reached the League Championship Series prove that the best things—like building a pennant winner—often take time

BY JOE SHEEHAN

PATIENCE IS the watchword for the four franchises that reached the penultimate round of baseball's postseason. None of them has won a World Series in the past 22 years—not since the advent of the wild card, two of the three networks that aired the Division Series or even 20-year-old Blue Jays closer Roberto Osuna. The Royals, who in 2014 reached their first postseason in 29 years, are the old men at this party, with none of the other three teams having been to the playoffs since at least '08.

Indeed, the Blue Jays, Cubs, Mets and Royals underline the need for patience in building a championship-caliber club. Baseball is unlike the NFL

or the NBA. Payroll caps, the immediate impact of drafted talent and the ease with which individual players can dominate make it possible to turn around a bad football or basketball team quickly. Baseball doesn't work that way. Having Mike Trout or Bryce Harper—whose teams have yet to win a postseason series—just means you have a nice building block. You still need to put together a complete team.

That's what the final four have done. Each team has been assembled through amateur scouting, statistical analysis, clever trades and the occasional big check. It just took time.

Consider the Royals, whose GM, Dayton Moore, was a candidate to be fired

last season before his club sprinted to the World Series. They drafted first baseman Eric Hosmer third overall in 2008. Third baseman Mike Moustakas was taken with the No. 2 pick in 2007. Leftfielder Alex Gordon was chosen in the same spot in '05. That's three top three draft picks who, until this season, had never had a good year in the majors at the same time.

Even that core needed to be supplemented. So in December 2010 Moore made one of the best salary-dump trades ever, sending Zack Greinke, one year removed from winning the AL Cy Young Award, to the Brewers for a package of prospects that included Lorenzo Cain and Alcides Escobar—the centerfielder

and shortstop, respectively, who now anchor a group that ranked sixth in MLB this year in defensive efficiency. Kansas City also went into the Dominican Republic to get starter Yordano Ventura and reliever Kelvin Herrera, and into Venezuela to sign catcher Salvador Perez. These moves took years to pay off, and they did with the help of last winter's haul of veteran free agents: DH Kendrys Morales, starter Edinson Volquez



DAVID E. KUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (CAIN); BRAD MANNING FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GORDON)



built with young players, Anthopoulos repeatedly cashed his in, making big trades for starting pitchers Mark Buehrle and R.A. Dickey three years ago, for third baseman Josh Donaldson last off-season and for shortstop Troy Tulowitzki and ace David Price in July. Anthopoulos sent out 14 prospects, four of whom had been first-round picks, in those deals. The Jays have also done a remarkable job of turning unwanted players into stars. Their three-four-five hitters in the decisive ALDS Game 5 against the Rangers—Jose Bautista, Edwin Encarnacion and Chris Colabello—had all been designated for assignment at one point in their careers.

Anthopoulos, whose team fell behind the Royals 2-0 in the ALCS, may have to face some of his traded

and reliever Ryan Madson, plus July's trade-deadline pickups, starter Johnny Cueto and infielder Ben Zobrist. Moore, now in his 10th year as Kansas City's GM, used every avenue to build a winner.

Alex Anthopoulos became the Blue Jays' GM in 2009 and, like Moore, found his job security in question when Toronto failed to reach the playoffs in his tenure before winning the AL East this season. While the Royals

prospects again in the World Series. Two of the Mets' young stars, catcher Travis d'Arnaud and starter Noah Syndergaard, came to New York in the Dickey trade. That deal was made by current Mets GM Sandy Alderson, who also acquired outfielder Yoenis Cespedes at the July 31 deadline in the deal that turned the team's season around. Still, this organization underscores a point that isn't made enough: a GM's tenure often can't be

GO FIGURE

12,425



Signatures, as of Monday evening, on an online petition at Change.org started by a Royals fan requesting that Fox remove Joe Buck from broadcasting the ALCS. The numbers got a boost when Buck tweeted out the link himself, writing, in part, "C'mon people let's get behind this!"



\$50

Estimated amount spent by a Cubs fan to play the 1984 Steve Goodman song "Go Cubs Go" on jukeboxes at bars and restaurants in St. Louis after Chicago beat the Cardinals in the NLDS. The fan, who has asked to remain anonymous, used an app to play the songs remotely.

0-4

Combined record for the Astros and Rangers after Texas governor Greg Abbott prematurely tweeted on Oct. 12: "Congrats to the Astros on advancing to the ALCS! Hoping for an all Texas ALCS. Looking at you, Rangers."



\$28,001

Combined amount wagered, and lost, by all three contestants last Friday on *Final Jeopardy!* The answer: "When translated the full name of this [MLB] team gets you a double redundancy." Question: What are the Los Angeles Angels?

evaluated until he's gone. Omar Minaya was fired in October 2010, but the 2015 Mets are living off draft picks made by his administration. Postseason heroes Daniel Murphy (13th round, '06) and Jacob deGrom (9th, '10), plus ace Matt Harvey (1st, '10) and slugging first baseman Lucas Duda (7th, '07) are all Minaya-era selections. The Mets, run on a relative shoestring in recent years because of their owners' involvement in the Madoff financial scandal, wouldn't

have gone anywhere this season without that core of low-paid talent. If they win the World Series—they led Chicago 2-0 in the NLCS through Sunday—Minaya deserves a ring.

The Cubs' brain trust, led by president Theo Epstein and GM Jed Hoyer, has been in charge for just four years, but it's been under enormous pressure from a devoted, frustrated fan base that expected the same immediate success in Chicago that pair helped engineer in

Boston. Instead, the Cubs lost 286 games in the duo's first three years. All the while, however, Epstein and Hoyer were dealing for cornerstones like first baseman Anthony Rizzo and shortstop Addison Russell. Chicago also emphasized power in the draft, a plan that culminated in two top five picks, Kris Bryant and Kyle Schwarber, who combined for five homers in the team's first seven playoff games. They shifted from building to





winning with big moves when the time was right, hiring Joe Maddon as manager and signing lefty Jon Lester last off-season.

Winning takes time, skill, luck and, just as important, patience. Every year teams that think they're a player away spend money, talent or both to bring one in, only to repeat the cycle the next year.

The LCS clubs provide the road map for the other 26 teams: Give talented people time and resources, and they will produce wins. □

Front Office Grades

How baseball's final four have done in each major category of team-building

TEAMS	FREE AGENCY	DRAFT	TRADES	INTERNATIONAL SIGNINGS	SYNOPSIS
 Royals	C	A-	A	A-	Trading Greinke for Cain and Escobar gave Kansas City a CF and a SS and set the stage for the Royals to become a great defensive team. But Dayton Moore's free-agency misadventures (like pitcher Gil Meche) ruin a report card that otherwise puts his scouting bona fides on display.
 Blue Jays	A	B+	A-	C	Chris Colabello was a waiver-wire pickup, but we'll count him under "free agency." The draft grade takes into account picking players who developed trade value, not just current contributors. The Jays, once a dominant force in the Caribbean talent market, have fallen behind in that area.
 Mets	B	A-	B+	B	Young arms Jacob deGrom, Matt Harvey and Steven Matz were draft picks, while Noah Syndergaard, catcher Travis d'Arnaud and OF Yoenis Cespedes arrived in trades. The Mets are conservative in free agency, but Curtis Granderson has worked out well.
 Cubs	B	A+	A+	C	Homegrown position players are exceptional, and getting ace Jake Arrieta from Baltimore in 2013 was the difference between still rebuilding and a playoff berth. Had OF Jorge Soler been healthy all year, the International grade might be higher.

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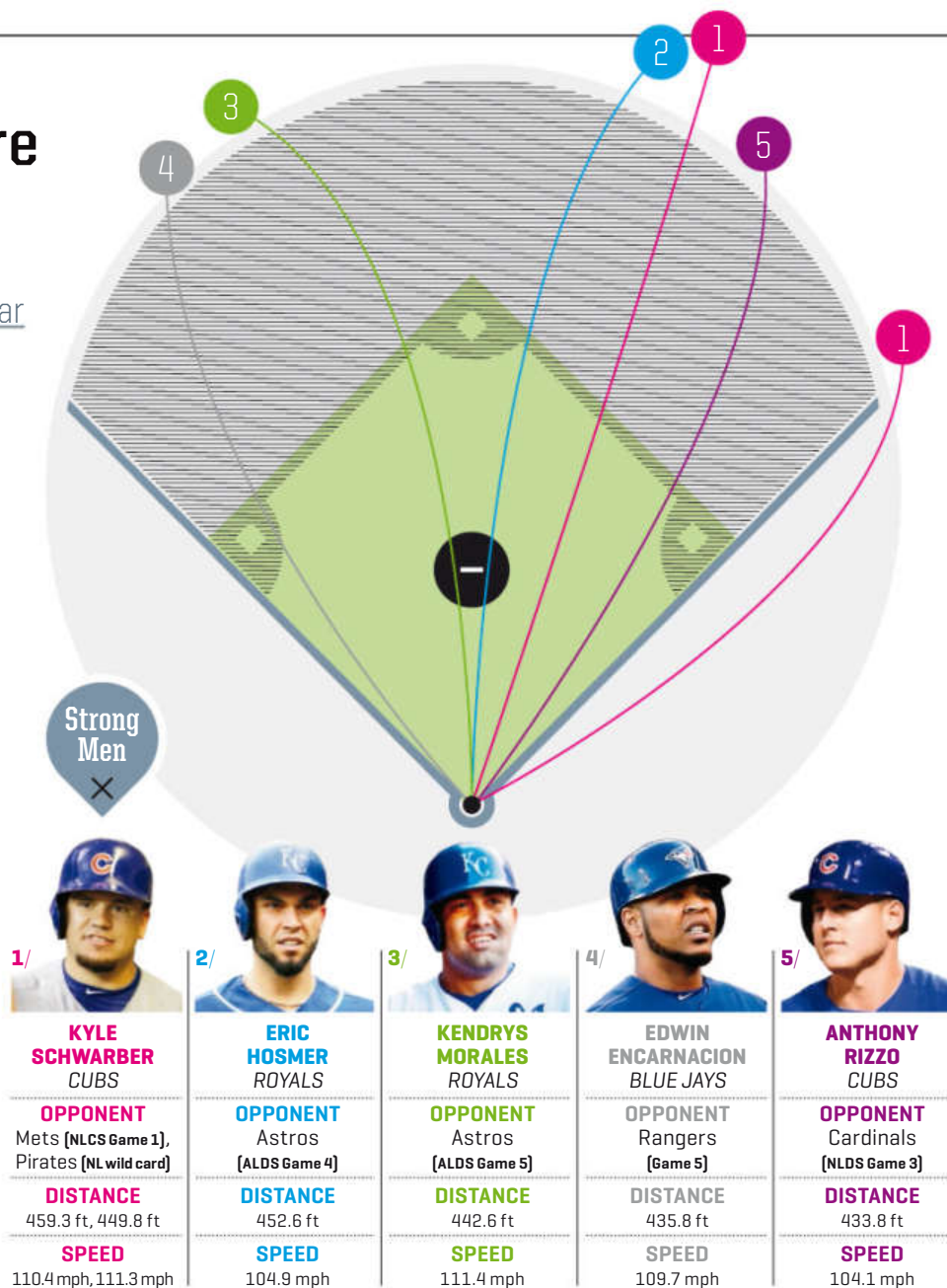
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Gape Measure Blasts

The longest of this month's long balls—so far

DETERMINING THE most memorable home run of this postseason is already nearly impossible. Is it Kyle Schwarber's moon shot from NLDS Game 4, which has taken up permanent residence atop the Wrigley Field scoreboard? The one that ended with Jose Bautista's epic bat flip from ALDS Game 5? Or any of Daniel Murphy's five unexpected dingers?

At least there no longer needs to be a debate about which home run was hit the farthest, or the fastest. MLB.com's Statcast debuted this year, providing all that information and becoming a staple of postseason broadcasts. Here's a look at the five players on the four LCS teams—the Blue Jays and the Royals in the AL, and the Cubs and the Mets in the NL—who have hit the longest homers this postseason.



Breaking In to TV

A-Rod makes his move to the studio. Will he strike out?



VIEWERS SHOULD NOT be surprised that Fox Sports hired Yankees designated hitter Alex Rodriguez as a studio analyst for the postseason. (He'll be joined on set by another member of baseball's rogues' gallery—Pete Rose.)

It's a no-lose move for Fox. The expectations for A-Rod are low, and his name alone may make people tune in. The show will likely get some hate-watchers too, and they still count in the ratings. A-Rod certainly knows baseball. MLB reporters attest that his knowledge is off the charts and that he sees

everything on the field. Will that translate into interesting commentary? Fox thinks so. "Alex is one of the most compelling figures in baseball," says Fox Sports president of production John Entz. "We've always felt he would be an incredibly insightful analyst."

—Richard Deitsch

EXTRA MUSTARD



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

The hero of the Blue Jays' 6-3 ALDS clincher, Jose Bautista, rode home from the game on a scooter.

Kyle Schwarber

Cubs lefty hit a Ruthian shot over the scoreboard at Wrigley. Looks as if he's taking on the G.O.A.T.



HOT
NOT



The Astros

There's a one-year delay in removing the outfield hill at Minute Maid Park. They just can't get over the hump.

The Fame Game

WHAT BETTER way to project who will win this year's World Series than by matching up the most famous and successful celebrity fans of each team. The Mets might have the most total wattage, but in a one-star-per-round survive-and-advance format, Chris Rock and Jon Stewart don't even get in the game.



PAUL RUDD

Rudd takes some heat for the last season of *Friends*, but his history with Judd Apatow gets him past omnipresent hip-hop lightweight Drake.



DRAKE



JASON SUDEIKIS

VINCE VAUGHN

The Cubbies trot out Vaughn, the *Swingers* star who always has a green light, but K.C.'s Sudeikis played a catcher in *Eastbound & Down*.

Royals™



BILL MURRAY

In a tooth-and-nail battle of aces, Murray takes out *Seinfeld* in extra innings; it's a Cinderella story.



JERRY SEINFELD

THEY SAID IT

"I HAVE SO FEW BRAIN CELLS LEFT, I HAVE TO PROTECT THEM. THEY'RE ON THE ENDANGERED-SPECIES LIST RIGHT NOW."

Joe Maddon

Cubs manager talking about his days of relatively tame post-NLDS celebration.





JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: *What was it like to be front row during Game 5 of the ALDS [between the Blue Jays and the Rangers]?*

GEDDY LEE: The seventh inning [was] probably the weirdest and most intense inning I've ever experienced in my many years of loving baseball. It kind of bordered on a riot at one point. It was a little scary.

DP: *Toronto has to be hungry for a winner since the '93 World Series title.*

GL: That's really true. I like to think that the idiots who were throwing things on the field [in Game 5] were frustrated Maple Leafs fans and not actual baseball fans.

DP: *How many times have you sung the national anthem before a baseball game?*

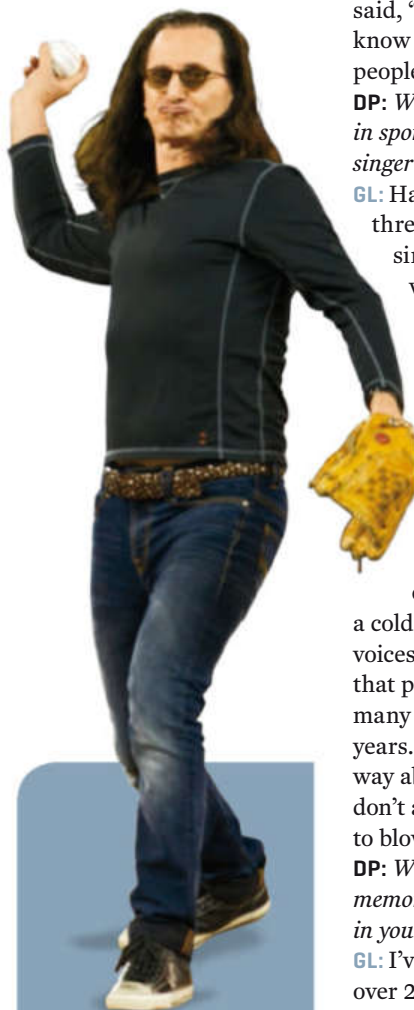
GL: Only once. I did it in 1993 at Camden Yards for the All-Star Game. I swore, one and done. It's kind of a nerve-racking experience.

DP: *You've also thrown out the first pitch a couple of times.*

GL: Yeah, I did it at the home opener here a couple of years ago (*right*), and I did it once in Arlington with my guitar player, Alex Lifeson, as my batterymate.

DP: *Anthem or first pitch? Compare the two.*

GL: They're both more nerve-racking than doing a show. A show is what I've been doing my whole



GEDDY LEE

PERFECT PITCH?

The 62-year-old bassist and lead singer of the Canadian rock band Rush is a die-hard baseball fan and a Blue Jays season-ticket holder, but even he gets a little jittery when asked to take the mound.

life. In '93 as I walked out onto the field [to sing], a nice lady from the network said, "You'll be happy to know there's 80 million people watching tonight."

DP: *Which position in sports does a lead singer compare to?*

GL: Hard to compare in a three-piece band. The singer is the most vulnerable, because his instrument is his body. He's like a pitcher in that sense.

DP: *Do you feel like a starting pitcher when you go out?*

GL: That's the closest analogy. Singers live in a state of fear of catching a cold [and losing their voices]. You have to baby that part of you. I've known many pitchers through the years. They feel the same way about their arms. They don't allow air-conditioning to blow on them etc.

DP: *What sports memorabilia do you have in your man cave?*

GL: I've been collecting for over 25 years. I have quite an interesting array of signed balls from Hall of Famers. I have a collection of presidential baseballs. I try to focus on first-pitch balls. I always wanted to be a pitcher. I try to find a lot of balls from no-hitters. I recently acquired both baseballs from Johnny Vander Meer's consecutive no-hitters [in 1938]. That was a prize for me. □

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



Ravens QB **Joe Flacco** admitted that

comedy isn't his strong suit. "I don't look at myself as being very funny," Flacco told me. "You see me, not a ton of expression. I think some people laugh at me more than laugh with me." ... Former Mets pitcher and current baseball



analyst **Ron Darling** told me

not to buy into pitch-velocity stats. "Today's guns are not right," Darling said. "They're a different kind of gun. Nolan Ryan would not hit 100 mph on the guns we used. And no one threw harder than Nolan Ryan." ... Former NFL tight end and current



studio analyst **Tony Gonzalez**

said Seahawks tight end Jimmy Graham needs to reset his expectations in Seattle: "Those days of Jimmy catching 85–95 balls for 1,200–1,300 yards and 14 TDs are probably in the rearview mirror as long as he's out there."



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The Case for . . . Droughts

BY PHIL TAYLOR

LOOK AT them, those fans of teams that win titles so often. They seem so happy, don't they? Patriots fans wake up every day and debate which piece of their Super Bowl championship gear to wear. Should they go with the hoodie from the Pats' title last season, or maybe the wool cap from 2001, the T-shirt from '03 or the jacket from '04? San Francisco Giants fans weigh which recent World Series title was more rewarding. Was it the first one in '10 against Texas, the sweep of Detroit in '12 or the seven-game nail-biter over Kansas City last season? Then they give up, agree that choosing one title is as impossible as picking a favorite child and gleefully make a date to meet at next season's championship parade.

Don't be envious of those poor souls, so drunk on all that winning. Pity them, for they know not what they miss. Fans who have titles of recent vintage have forgotten the exquisite agony of a championship drought and, more important, the unmatched elation that comes with ending one.

Baseball's four teams that entered the week still having a chance to win the World Series—the Cubs (107 years since their last title), Royals (30), Mets (29) and Blue Jays (22)—all have fan bases who know the hunger that comes from decades without a championship. That's probably why there seemed to be no



villain in the LCS field, nothing but a bunch of sentimental favorites (although those cursed Cubbies appeared to have grabbed the most hearts around the country). One of the benefits of going so many years without a title is that there is little animosity toward your team. The clubs in the ALCS and the NLCS haven't exactly made a habit of crushing other fans' hopes, so who can hate them? Teams in a drought may get mocked or pitied, but despised? Never.

Droughts also make teams memorable in a way they will never be again once they have won. Remember when the Red Sox hadn't won a World Series since 1918, when they were the subject of books and essays about the curse of the Bambino? Then they won the Series in 2004 and again in '07 and '13, and now they're just another franchise that wins the occasional title.

It's natural to focus on the misery of a championship drought, but the flip side of that misery is anticipation, the constant daydreaming about how sweet it will feel

Fans who have titles of recent vintage have forgotten the unmatched elation that comes with winning one.

once the drought finally ends. Clevelanders, whose teams haven't won a title in a major sport since 1964, have had 51 years to fantasize about the Day It Finally Happens, which, in a way, might be almost as fun as the day it finally happens.

The Cubs, Mets, Blue Jays and Royals can give their fans what teams like the Blackhawks, Cardinals, Patriots and Spurs cannot—the joy of wearing a crown for the first time in a long time.

When the New York Rangers won the Stanley Cup in 1994 after 54 years without one, a fan at Madison Square Garden held up a sign that read, NOW I CAN DIE IN PEACE. That's the kind of feeling that only comes at the end of a dry spell that lasted generations. Congratulations in advance to the fan base that will get to experience that kind of emotion after the World Series. But to the three others, do not feel too discouraged. There are two things that make a franchise special—a dynasty and a drought. It only takes a few years to achieve the first, but the second can take—and last—a lifetime. Embrace it. □



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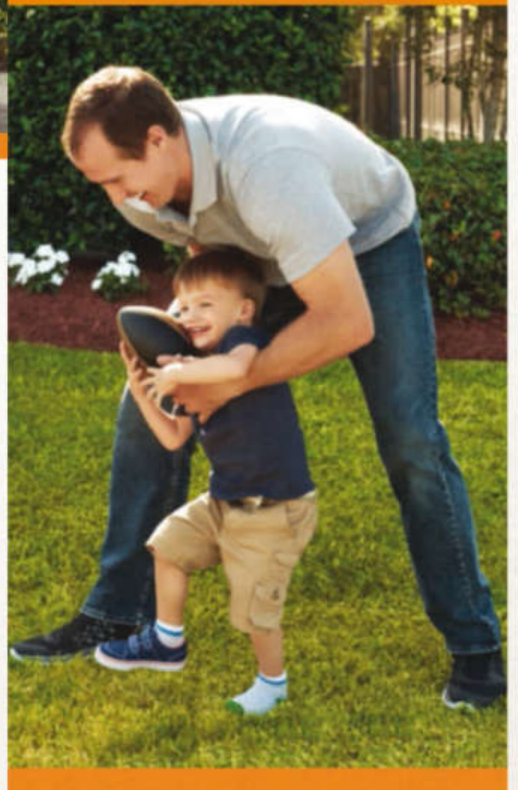


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HIGH SCHOOL
ATHLETE OF THE MONTH

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■ **NIA TOLIVER** has speed (12.1 seconds in the 100 meters), strength (she routinely pushes a 250-pound homemade workout sled in her backyard) and immeasurable determination. She could be a standout in any sport, but the senior honors student at View Park Prep in South Los Angeles plays rugby, and in a discipline not known for many women or minority participants, she's a role model and ambassador. Nia travels the globe as a captain for her high school squad and as a member of the national Girls' High School All-American team. She hopes to compete in college and at the 2016 Olympics. But her goal at home is to inspire the youth players she coaches through the Inner City Education Foundation public schools' rugby program, where she got her start. "You have to give kids something to shoot for," she says. "If they see you and you're tangible, you're real and you're doing it, it makes them want to do it too." For more on Nia, visit SI.com/HSathlete.



Jace Neugebauer | *McArthur, Calif.* | *Football*

Jace, a senior quarterback at Fall River High, threw for 133 yards and two scores in a 34-7 win over Mount Shasta High to set the California Northern Section career record for passing yards, with 6,130. As the starting middle linebacker, he also had a game-high 19 tackles and two interceptions, one of which he returned for a touchdown.



Zhané Crockett | *Toledo* | *Boxing*

Zhané, a sophomore at Jesup W. Scott High, was named the AIBA junior female boxer of the year. She took featherweight gold at junior worlds in Taipei, Taiwan, beating two-time Russian champion Liudmilla Vorontsova in a 2-1 decision. Zhané also claimed the junior nationals title and was runner-up at the Junior Olympics.



Ellen Hart | *Denver* | *Triathlon*

Hart, 57, defended her age-group title at the 140.6-mile Ironman worlds in Kona, Hawaii, finishing in 11:27:29 to become the 55-to-59 world champion in all four triathlon distances. Since August she has won titles at the Olympic distance (32.13 miles in 2:20:30), the sprint (16.0 miles in 1:13:28) and the Half Ironman (70.3 miles in 5:20:17).

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited By **ALEXANDRA FENWICK**



Taylor Bucklin | *Greenwich, Conn.* | *Soccer*

Bucklin, a junior goalkeeper at Louisville, made eight saves in a 2-1 upset of top-ranked North Carolina. A week later she made a career-high 10 saves in a scoreless draw with Duke. Bucklin, who set a school record with an 0.48 goals-against average as a freshman at Michigan, had an .848 save percentage and an 0.97 GAA through Sunday.



Austin Plevy | *Langley, B.C.* | *Ice Hockey*

Plevy, a freshman forward at UMass, had a hat trick along with an assist in his NCAA debut, a 6-3 defeat of Colorado College. The next day he netted the game-winner with 3:07 left to clinch a 4-3 victory over Colorado. Last season Plevy led the Alberta Junior Hockey League with 92 points (29 goals, 63 assists) for the Brooks Bandits.



Max Letunov | *Moscow* | *Ice Hockey*

Letunov, a freshman forward at UConn, scored three times in his NCAA debut, leading the Huskies to a 5-2 win over Alabama-Huntsville. He tallied 64 points (25 goals, 39 assists) with the United States Hockey League's Youngstown (Ohio) Phantoms last year, leading them to a 40-14-6 record and the regular-season title.

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ONE GREEN-AS-THE-JETS'-LOGO GENERAL MANAGER'S ABSURD,



MARCH 10
WR **Brandon Marshall**
Acquired in a trade
with the Bears

MARCH 11
QB **Ryan Fitzpatrick**
Acquired in a trade
with the Texans

MARCH 14
G **James Carpenter**
Signed as a free agent,
Seahawks

TEN PLAYERS, AND 100-PLUS S OF JOE

BY GREG BISHOP

Photographs by Michael J. LeBrecht II

For Sports Illustrated Photo Illustration by SI Premedia

UNFATHOMABLE MISSION TO RETURN A FRANCHISE TO GLORY



MARCH 18

FS **Marcus Gilchrist**
Signed as a free agent,
Chargers

MARCH 14

CB **Darrelle Revis**
Signed as a free agent,
Patriots

MARCH 14

CB **Buster Skrine**
Signed as a free agent,
Browns

MARCH 18

CB **Antonio Cromartie**
Signed as a free agent,
Cardinals

T

HE GENERAL MANAGER who engineered the NFL's best off-season is a history buff, a grunge band aficionado and a *Game of Thrones* devotee. He can consume 12 to 15 cups of coffee a day but is trying to cut back to something reasonable. Like nine cups.

Mike Maccagnan reveres Abraham Lincoln, references the Napoleonic Code and devours books, like *On War*, about military strategy. He's forever the son of a history teacher, which is fitting because the franchise he took over back in January has a past best described as "tortured." At the risk of sounding redundant: Maccagnan is the GM of the Jets.

Before he climbed to director of college scouting for the Texans, before the front-office gigs in Saskatchewan and Ottawa and London, before he shelved the dream of becoming a financial analyst on Wall Street, Maccagnan was an intern for the Redskins in 1990. He often shuttled players to and from the airport. It's possible—likely, even—that at some point he ferried a veteran Washington safety named Todd Bowles.

Both men grew up in New Jersey—Maccagnan outside Princeton, Bowles in Elizabeth. And both shared an obsession: football. Bowles was the star player with a scholarship to Temple; Maccagnan was the future economics major besotted with the NFL draft. (He also played some nosetackle at Trinity College, in Connecticut.)

Maccagnan's boss with the Skins, GM Charley Casserly, sensed that his Nirvana-jamming intern could see the bigger picture—how to construct a team from so many disparate personalities and skill sets—and he tabbed Maccagnan as a future personnel executive. Meanwhile, Washington quarterback Doug Williams saw in his friend Bowles a mild-mannered safety who never seemed out of position and who went everywhere whistling Gladys Knight tunes. Bowles aligned the secondary that intercepted three John Elway passes in the Redskins' 42–10 triumph over the Broncos in Super Bowl XXII. He struck Williams as a future coach.

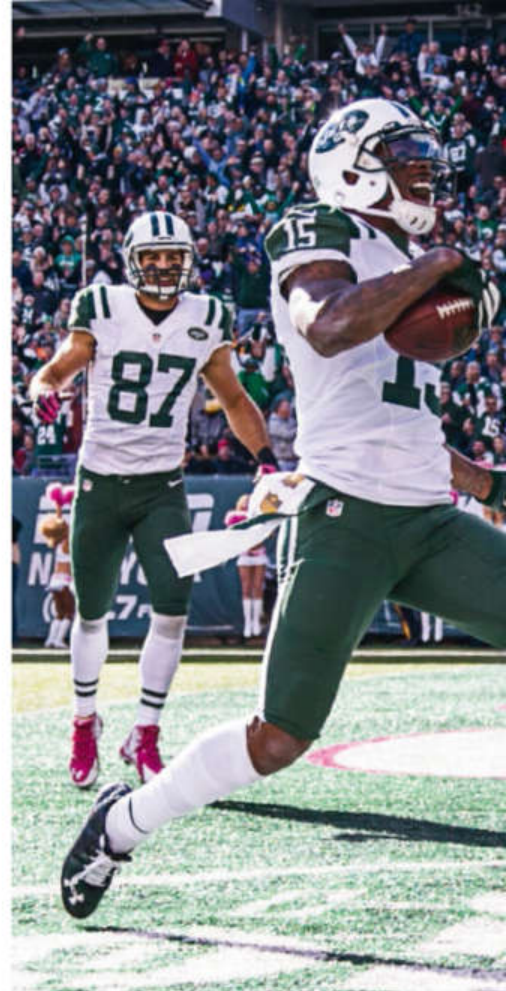
Flash forward to January 2015. The Jets, with Casserly on their search committee after flaming out at 4–12 and firing Rex Ryan, name Maccagnan their new GM. Maccagnan drives to the airport to pick up a candidate for the vacant head coach position: Bowles, the Cardinals' defensive coordinator known for his blitz-heavy schemes. The two men pass Elizabeth en route to the team's facility in Florham Park, but they do not reminisce. There's no time for two Jersey guys to consider any history other than that which they hope to make together.

Maccagnan hires Bowles, and they gather, along with New York's personnel department, inside a conference room on most days between January and March to evaluate free agents. They know they have more than \$50 million available in cap space and that they need to overhaul their secondary and that they want a receiver, a guard and a veteran backup quarterback. Tape plays from 7 a.m. most mornings until 7 p.m. some nights. They make a wish list and organize nameplates on a whiteboard. It feels like something straight off of Maccagnan's bookshelf—big picture, all strategy and tactics.

Soon, the nine days in March that will redefine a franchise will be upon them.

THE STORY of those nine days is the story of the modern NFL, where the salary cap has swelled to \$143.28 million and player movement has reached unprecedented levels. Ideally, all franchises want to build through the draft, a cheaper, more sustainable alternative to free agency. But Maccagnan and Bowles did not enter into an ideal world. They inherited a team with more holes than draft picks.

The Jets knew their roster remodeling would not come cheap. Everyone overpays in free agency. The key is not to overpay *too* much, to minimize risk and maximize return.



MARSHALL PLAN

Maccagnan and Bowles (right) traded for a receiver (above) and then got a QB, Fitzpatrick (far right), who could find him for 100 yards per game.

On March 5, while attending Clemson's pro day, Maccagnan ran into newly hired Bears GM Ryan Pace. Chicago needed to move either quarterback Jay Cutler or receiver Brandon Marshall, two former friends who'd become embroiled in a public feud. Maccagnan imagined Marshall's bolstering the Jets' passing offense, which had ranked dead last in 2014, with just eight TDs by wide receivers. Denver, Miami, Chicago—Marshall found the end zone wherever he played.

While the teams exchanged proposals, the Jets dug into Marshall's background, which included a history of domestic violence allegations (no criminal charges have ever been filed), skirmishes with teammates and a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. Marshall had been playing for the Dolphins in 2011 when Bowles, then an assistant, became Miami's interim coach late in the season.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DAVID BERGMAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; JEFF ZELEVANSKY/GETTY IMAGES; WILLIAM PERLMAN/ADVANCE MEDIA FOR NFL.COM/USA TODAY SPORTS



Bowles liked that the receiver arrived before teammates most mornings and never dropped his intensity. So he vouched for him. The Jets dealt a fifth-round pick for Marshall and his 65 touchdown receptions (plus the Bears' seventh-round selection) on March 10. *Extreme Makeover, Florham Park Edition* had begun.

Ryan Fitzpatrick saw the Marshall trade scroll across the ticker at home in Houston, where his wife was expecting their fifth child and the quarterback was rehabbing a broken left leg. "I was trying to get over the fact that I was probably headed to my fourth team in four years," says the now-former Ram, Bengal, Bill, Titan and Texan. "That's been our life, the craziness. We had so many houses, I was slowly becoming a real estate mogul."



AFTER SKRINE
SIGNED, HE SAYS,
"THE DOMINOES
STARTED TO FALL.
LIKE A SNOWBALL
ROLLING DOWN
THE HILL."

had learned a valuable lesson: While several teams waited for the top cornerback, Nnamdi Asomugha, to decide where he was going, the Texans snuck in and landed Johnathan Joseph, the consensus No. 2 corner. By the time the losers in the Asomugha sweepstakes shifted their dollars elsewhere, they were stuck with No. 3, at best. In '15, while dozens of franchises focused their attention on one of two corners, Darrelle Revis and Byron Maxwell, Maccagnan simultaneously tilted his aim a hair lower, targeting the Browns' Buster Skrine.

The Jets fancied Skrine as a potential nickel corner, a hybrid player in Bowles's ever-shifting defense. In the end, six teams pursued Skrine, but he committed to New York over the phone, without a visit. Why? He wanted to play for Bowles. "His system was similar to what I had played in Cleveland—only a little bit better," says Skrine. Then, he explains, "the dominoes started to fall. Like a snowball rolling down the hill."

When the Patriots (predictably) declined to pick up Revis's \$20 million option for a second year in New England and he hit the open market, the Jets—familiar with his skill set and comfortable with the price—pounced. Their offer contained \$39 million in guaranteed money over the first three seasons of a five-year deal. Revis and his representatives gathered at a condominium in Hollywood, Fla., with sweeping views of the Atlantic Ocean and agreed to terms barely four hours after Skrine had signed. They celebrated with seafood, pasta and wine. "I was looking at the roster,

The Jets wanted Fitzpatrick because the QB had spent three seasons in Buffalo playing for New York's new offensive coordinator, Chan Gailey. He could translate the playbook. He could also compete with incumbent Geno Smith and mentor any quarterback the Jets might draft. (They figured at that point to take at least one.) The counseling part of the job was particularly important because the consensus was that the previous year's backup, Michael Vick, had no effect on Smith. He wasn't a bad influence, but he wasn't a mentor, either.

Fitzpatrick's agent called and told him not to report to the Texans' facility for rehab. Something was in the works—another trade. New York obtained Fitzpatrick for a conditional seventh-rounder.

Two days, two deals.

Meanwhile, free agency had started.

AT THE NFL scouting combine in February, Maccagnan had stood before a throng of media and promised that the Jets would be active in free agency. He had a plan. Watching in 2011 he

all the pieces,” says Revis, who played for the Jets from 2007 through ’12. “You could see where they were headed.”

With two corners committed, the Jets chased after a guard. They failed to land Mike Iupati (who ended up with the Cardinals) and Orlando Franklin (Chargers) but managed to procure their third choice, James Carpenter, a four-year starter with the Seahawks. The Skrine, Revis and Carpenter contracts became official on March 14. The Carpenter deal yielded a bonus: Because he came cheaper than the other guards the Jets had eyeballed, they had about \$4 million in additional leftover cash.

Revis, for one, knew where to spend it. He sent a text message to cornerback Antonio Cromartie, a former teammate who’d spent 2014 playing for Bowles’s Cardinals. “What’s up, man?” Revis tapped into his iPhone.

“I’m coming,” Cromartie wrote back.

As the flurry of activity continued, free-agent defensive back Marcus Gilchrist toured the Jets’ palatial headquarters, the walls lined with murals of fans, the cafeteria stocked with organic food. He wondered if there was any money left.

There was, but it came with one condition: New York wanted to shift Gilchrist—until then a cornerback and strong safety—to *free* safety, a position he’d played some in San Diego. If that happened, they could move Calvin Pryor from free safety to strong, a position that better matched his skill set: *stop the run, hit, hit, hit.*

Gilchrist reminded Bowles of Tyrann Mathieu, another corner turned safety who played a hybrid role in his Arizona defense. In New York, Bowles would give Gilchrist similar responsibilities: make the defensive calls, align teammates, shift coverages. Seven months later Bowles calls Gilchrist the Jets’ most underrated acquisition. “He’s our Tony Parker,” says Revis.

The Gilchrist and Cromartie signings became official on March 18, eight days after the Marshall trade. In dizzying total the Jets had obtained six starters and a nickel cornerback—basically another starter. Their billionaire owner, Woody Johnson, had committed almost \$200 million to those players and guaranteed \$87.3 million. Still, Maccagnan included outs in several of the deals, allowing for flexibility in future off-seasons.

New York’s rebuilt 53-man roster featured 20 new players when the season started, a turnover of about 38%. “We expected change,” says left tackle D’Brickashaw Ferguson. “But this was extreme, unlike anything I’ve been through. It really is a whole new locker room.”

In those nine days, Maccagnan had consumed something shy of 135 cups of coffee and lost about 10 pounds. To celebrate his haul, he started to sign lower-level free agents. “I need to buy him a Starbucks,” says Bowles.

He doesn’t mean a single latte. He means a store.

ALL THAT movement caught the eye of Bowles’s mentor, Bill Parcells, who had hired Bowles as a defensive backs coach with the Jets (in 2000) and the Cowboys (’05). “I always thought he had the qualities to be a head coach,” says Parcells. “He’s steady. And he’s smart.”

Parcells sees roster construction as a process without an endpoint, and he notes that beyond the players the Jets acquired in free agency, they also gained flexibility for the draft. They figured that the top QB prospects (Florida State’s Jameis



SECONDARY SCHOOL

A whole new group of DBs—Skrine, Revis, Gilchrist and Cromartie (from top)—have helped turn around the Jets’ turnover situation. New York’s 15 takeaways in 2015 are No. 2 in the NFL.



Winston and Oregon’s Marcus Mariota) would be gone by the time they picked at No. 6, and they graded three players (USC defensive end Leonard Williams, Alabama receiver Amari Cooper and Florida D-end Dante Fowler Jr.) in a tier above the remainder of the field. Do the math: Five players, sixth pick . . .

As the draft approached, New York inquired about moving up to take one of the two quarterbacks but found the cost prohibitive. Jacksonville, at No. 3, feigned interest in Cooper, but that proved to be a smokescreen. The Jags took Fowler, and the Raiders nabbed Cooper next.

When the Redskins drafted Iowa tackle Brandon Scherff at No. 5, the Jets’

draft room erupted in cheers. Williams, a player many experts tabbed as the draft's best talent, had fallen to them. That New York's defensive line was its strongest unit mattered not even a little bit. The Jets called up Williams. He could hear the celebration in the background.

He became the eighth starter they added this off-season.

NEW YORK'S season started in typical fashion, which is to say chaotically. The team's MVP from 2014, defensive tackle Sheldon Richardson, was arrested in July for resisting arrest and for multiple traffic violations (he pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial)—that on top of his existing four-game suspension for violating the league's substance abuse policy. Linebacker IK Enemkpali coldcocked Smith over a \$600 debt in August, breaking the QB's jaw. "Busy" is all Bowles will allow to describe that time period.

That isn't the unexpected part. The surprise—outside of the locker room, at least—has been the Jets' winning four of their first five games, largely on the contributions of the eight impact players (counting Williams) they obtained this off-season. New York's revamped, and vastly improved, secondary has allowed Bowles to blitz more than any other team, leading to 15 takeaways, second in the NFL. (The Jets got 13 in *all* of 2014.) Fitzpatrick has maintained the NFL's bushiest beard and usurped Smith as the starting quarterback. He's connected with Marshall, a voracious reader of self-help books, for 511 yards and four touchdowns. And Carpenter has solidified a veteran offensive line that opens holes for Chris Ivory, who averages 5.5 yards per carry, tied for first among backs with at least 60 totes.

The Jets toppled the Redskins on Sunday, 34–20, their fourth win by double digits, and set up a marquee Week 7 matchup against the undefeated Patriots. Later—30 minutes after Revis baited Washington quarterback Kirk Cousins into an interception that sparked a 24-point swing, after Mar-

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shall hauled in seven passes for 111 yards and a score, after Fitzpatrick torched the Skins for 253 yards and three TDs and Ivory rumbled for 146 yards and another score—Revis was reenacting his pick in the locker room. He was singing Drake: “Jumpman, jumpman, jumpman. . . .” A few lockers over, Marshall, the first Jets receiver since Don Maynard in 1968 with four straight 100-yard games, sat alone. “Oh, man,” he said, to no one in particular. Fitzgerald walked by and slapped him on the back. They exchanged no words. They didn’t have to. Their record says enough.

Issues remain, though. Like: Fitzpatrick’s whopping seven interceptions, the 14 penalties against the Dolphins in Week 4, punt-coverage struggles. But those are minor quibbles. The Jets—the *Jets!*—rank among the NFL’s most surprising teams, and they arrived here via the route, free agency, that fails more often than not. “That comes down to availability [versus] need, and money,” says Caserly. “And Mike had all three.”

Inside his office last week, with papers scattered atop his desk, Bowles tried to minimize the Jets’ surprise start. He wore a black hat, a gray sweatshirt and an expression that landed somewhere around bemused. He had added all those players and survived two crises, and yet he sounded unimpressed. On Oct. 12, he had stood before his team, following New York’s bye week. He told his players they have not arrived. They haven’t yet won a close game in the fourth quarter, haven’t secured a victory through special teams, haven’t beaten a team like the one they will face this weekend, their bitter rival, the defending champion Patriots. “You haven’t done anything yet,” Bowles told them.

That’s the thing, though, about the way the Jets reconfigured: It appears they had New England in mind. A corner like Skrine can shadow shifty slot receivers like Julian Edelman or Danny Amendola. A versatile safety like Gilchrist helps eliminate the need to substitute against a Patriots offense that often goes no-huddle, with various combinations of pass targets. A receiver like Marshall can manhandle defenders in the red zone. A stacked defensive front like New York’s can



NEW LINE CINEMA

Williams, a draft-day addition, has been something to watch: He leads the Jets’ D-line with six QB hurries.

pressure Brady up the middle, which is the only pressure that consistently seems to frustrate him.

Altogether, it’s enough to give even the most cynical Gang Green fans hope, even those accustomed to fake spikes and butt fumbles and late-season collapses. The Jets, once 100-to-1 long shots to win the Super Bowl, are now 25 to 1, according to some sports books. And those odds look to improve. Richardson has returned from suspension. Running back Stevan Ridley (ACL/MCL) could return later this month. So could cornerback Dee Milliner (wrist), a first-round pick in 2013. The schedule—with games remaining against the Raiders, Jaguars, Bills, Texans, Dolphins, Giants and Titans—looks softer than Fitzpatrick’s beard after a nice conditioning.

In a way, it feels like 2008 all over again, when GM Mike Tannenbaum wheeled and dealt, adding Brett Favre, Alan Faneca, Kris Jenkins, Calvin Pace, Damien Woody and Tony Richardson through a combination of free-agency maneuvers and trades. Those players—minus Favre, who left after one year—formed the spine of a team that went to back-to-back AFC title games.

But Jets fans would prefer that this team recall another one, the 1968 outfit that won New York’s first and only Super Bowl. Maccagnan could celebrate a title with his favorite beverage, a cup of coffee. Or 15. □

Moving Men

Off-season reconstruction has four teams in motion: two up, two down

BY BROOKS KUBENA

BILLS

GM Doug Whaley buttressed new QB **Tyrod Taylor** by acquiring **Charles Clay** and **Percy Harvin**, the team’s top receivers, as well as RB **LeSean McCoy** and guard **Richie Incognito**. Buffalo has its highest-scoring offense in 11 years.

FALCONS

Rookie coach **Dan Quinn** restocked his line by signing guard **Chris Chester** and center **Mike Person** and trading for guard **Andy Levitre**. Atlanta is No. 4 in rushing yards and the front five is ranked first by Pro Football Focus.

EAGLES

New GM **Chip Kelly** jettisoned his three best offensive players, then added QB **Sam Bradford**, RB **DeMarco Murray** and rookie WR **Nelson Agholor**. The ’15 Eagles are averaging 58 fewer total yards than in ’14.

DOLPHINS

Miami blew much of its budget on DT **Ndamukong Suh** (zero sacks), then signed receivers **Kenny Stills**, **Greg Jennings** and rookie **DeVante Parker**. Now Miami has the No. 23 passing offense and the No. 25 rushing defense.





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THE ALL-NEW TACOMA



ONE PLAY remained in Michigan State's 90th football game against Michigan, but Tom Izzo had seen enough. Michigan State's basketball coach left the Spartans' bench last Saturday with his son, Steven, and walked back up the tunnel, toward their car. Izzo could commiserate with football coach Mark Dantonio later. He wanted to get out of Ann Arbor before bedlam hit.

And bedlam was coming. Not far from Izzo, Kevin Sedatole heard state troopers discuss what to do when Michigan fans rushed the field. Sedatole, the director of bands at Michigan State, grabbed his 16-year-old daughter, Julia, to prepare for a quick, safe exit. There would be no postgame show on the field with the Michigan band. The Michigan State band would play "Victory for MSU" quickly and ironically and leave the stadium.

Or so Sedatole assumed, since the No. 12 Wolverines led No. 7 Michigan State 23–21 and just needed to punt the ball from Michigan State's 47-yard line to end the game. They had not beaten the Spartans since 2012. They had not won the Big Ten title since '04. But under new coach Jim Harbaugh they were about to improve to 6–1, with the lone loss at No. 3 Utah, and in Michigan Stadium, happy minds wandered. What was next? A win over No. 1 Ohio State? A conference championship? A spot in the College Football Playoff? How big could they dream?

On the Spartans' sideline, Dantonio weighed his options. He had no good ones. He could try to set up a return, but Michigan might simply punt out-of-bounds. Dantonio had thought all week that his team might be able to block a punt; Blake O'Neill is a rugby-style punter who takes a few steps to his right before unloading, which requires an extra second. Dantonio decided to send all 11 players at O'Neill and hope for a miracle. "We gotta go get it!" Dantonio told his team, as he later recalled to SI. "Get 11 guys up. Nobody back. If you rough the guy, it doesn't matter. You gotta lay out, and you've gotta go. *This is our last shot.*"

"Scoop it if you get it."

Michigan had no reason to worry about executing. A grad student from Australia, O'Neill had impressed the coaches with his athleticism, and his hands are so sure that he is the holder on field goals. And the long snapper, junior Scott Sypniewski, is a rarity in college football: He was given a scholarship out of high school to perform that singular task. The Wolverines literally could not have been in better hands.

There were 10 seconds on the game clock and 17 seconds on the play clock when Sypniewski snapped the ball.

What Could GO WRO

IT'S A SNAP, RIGHT?

In the first quarter O'Neill booted an 80-yarder, two yards short of the school record, but he needed to deliver one more punt to close out the victory.

Photograph by
Steven King
Icon Sportswire



Possibly ONG?

+ COLLEGE FOOTBALL

MICHIGAN'S RESURGENCE WAS ONLY SECONDS FROM A NEW PEAK WHEN A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS—A DROPPED SNAP, A WHIFF, A SCOOP—DELIVERED A MICHIGAN STATE WIN THAT LEFT FANS OF BOTH TEAMS IN SHOCK

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG



CAL-STANFORD HAS The Play to Beat the Band (or to some, simply, The Play). Alabama-Auburn has the Kick Six. College football fans need no explanation for either.

Michigan-Michigan State now has the Shocked Punt: Sypniewski fires his snap low . . . the ball bounces off O'Neill's hands . . . O'Neill tries to pick it up and punt it anyway . . . the ball goes sideways into the hands of Michigan State's freshman cornerback Jalen Watts-Jackson . . . and Watts-Jackson bolts toward the end zone.

None of the 111,740 in attendance expected this. In the tunnel, Izzo heard the commotion and walked back down toward the field to see what was happening. On the sideline, Dantonio

touchdown on the Wolverines because the team had the audacity to plant a stake in the Spartan Stadium turf before the game. In other words, he is exactly the coach that East Lansing has always wanted. He needles the so-called Public Ivy and, more important, beats Michigan repeatedly.

Real rivals? As Watts-Jackson sprinted toward the Michigan student section, Dantonio was 6-2 against Michigan, and win number 7 was a few yards away. It got sweeter: Watts-Jackson is a product of Orchard Lake St. Mary's in the Detroit suburbs, a school that for decades sent its star players to Ann Arbor.

Michigan junior tight end Jake Butt started tackling Watts-Jackson at the two-yard line, with one second left. But by the time both men landed, they were in the end zone. Touchdown.

Michigan State 27, Michigan 23.

"Just an incredible ending to a great football game," Dantonio said. "And I think that's why football is loved so much in America."

As he said those words at his postgame press conference there was a steady



looked up and saw the seconds bleed away. He figured that Watts-Jackson had to get into the end zone; if he was tackled, time would expire before Michigan State could try a field goal.

How did it come to this? Not just the game. The rivalry. When Dantonio took the job in 2006, Michigan State had lost 29 of its last 37 games to Michigan. Everybody knew that the Wolverines' real rival was Ohio State. That was a blood feud. Michigan-Michigan State was a family spat.

Dantonio raised the stakes immediately. On one of his first days on the job he spoke at an all-state banquet and took a moment, mid-speech, to address the table full of Michigan coaches, saying, "We will be a player. I can promise you that."

The 59-year-old Dantonio usually cuts a bland figure for the media, speaking in a string of clichés, steady as a docked ship—unless Michigan is involved. Then he gets ornery. In 2007 he publicly warned Michigan that "the pride comes before the fall," and in '14 he admitted to pinning an extra

drumbeat outside the room. The Michigan Marching Band was heading back up the tunnel where Izzo had stood, out to its on-campus building, Revelli Hall, to host a reception for the Michigan State band. If there was any iciness between the bands, neither director saw it. Many of the musicians know their counterparts on the other side. Sedatole used to work at Michigan, where he wrote a book, *One Hundred Years of the Michigan Marching Band*.

Even on its wildest day, with two outstanding teams, Michigan-Michigan State is still a family spat. And if anyone wants to know the difference between the Michigan-Michigan State and Michigan-Ohio State rivalries, maybe this explains it: Next month, Ohio State visits Michigan. There will be no reception for their band. There never is.

WOLVERINES SPECIAL TEAMS coach John Baxter walked through the parking lot outside the stadium, sipping a Diet Dr Pepper and processing what had happened. His unit had won the game—right up until the moment it lost it. Even Dantonio said afterward, "If we'd lost, I'd have said, 'We've got to play better on special teams.'"

O'Neill had boomed an 80-yard punt. Michigan's sophomore safety/returner Jabrill Peppers had brought back a kickoff 49 yards and a punt 34 yards. Michigan State tried a fake punt and Michigan stopped it. But on the simplest play of the game—a punt to nobody—Michigan fell apart.

“Welcome to the latest episode of *Truth Is Stranger than Fiction*,” Baxter said. “That was the fluke of all flukes. And we’ll choose to look at it that way. We do too many good things, and practice hard and play hard, and make too many plays.”

Besides coaching football, Baxter is in charge of something called the Academic Game Plan. Baxter calls the program “a coaching approach to the game of school,” and it is not football-related. He teaches players how to absorb information efficiently and thoroughly, how to improve their study habits and how to navigate life. Harbaugh loves it so much that he took Baxter off the road for much of the critical recruiting month of January so that he could teach it. Senior linebacker Joe Bolden said in the spring that Baxter’s program “has immensely helped every single individual on the team.”

Now the Wolverines were learning in the hardest way. Bolden had missed most of the rivalry game because of a questionable

THE MOOT BOOT

After a low snap O’Neill (12) coughed up the ball to Watts-Jackson (20), who followed a caravan of blockers 38 yards into the end zone as time expired.



targeting penalty. Michigan “fans” on social media were harassing O’Neill, with some suggesting he commit suicide. And this is the fundamental difference between Michigan State’s gift-six and Cal’s run through the Stanford band or Auburn’s return of a missed field goal: There was a single, obvious goat.

Before the snap hit O’Neill’s hands, he was one of the best stories on Michigan’s team. At a practice last week former Wolverines coach Lloyd Carr asked O’Neill about himself. O’Neill explained his technique and talked about his hometown of Melbourne. O’Neill did not play American football until last season, when the former Aussie Rules player attended Weber State. Perhaps if he grew up in the Michigan thumb or a Pennsylvania steel town or Texarkana, he would have instinctively covered the ball when he dropped it, leaving Michigan State with one last play from the Michigan 40-yard line. Instead, a punter who grew up almost 10,000 miles away will forever be associated with rivals who sit 65 miles apart.

FIVE YEARS ago Michigan State beat Notre Dame 34–31 in East Lansing on a fake field goal in overtime, a play that Dantonio called Little Giants. The win helped establish Dantonio’s program. That night, he had a heart attack.

On Saturday, less than an hour after his team won a crazier game against a bigger rival, Dantonio seemed downright sedate. He is more comfortable with his program and his accomplishments than he was after Little Giants; the

Spartans are 31–3 in the last three years. There was a time when he would have bristled at questions about validation, but Saturday he seemed amused by one. “I hope that our football program’s been validated now,” he said evenly. “We’ve won 11-games-plus four times. We can play.”

A few minutes later Dantonio stood in the visitors’ locker room and pondered his new reality. His program no longer needed flukes to beat Michigan. But it got one anyway. And it was unlikely to send him to the hospital that night. “Football is a crazy game,” he said. “I try to keep it in context with life in general, as much as anything.”

Michigan fans trudged out of the old bowl, stunned. Even the few Michigan State fans seemed muted. A decade ago they would have gleefully celebrated any win over the Wolverines. But their standards have changed.

Five Dean Trailways buses waited to take the Michigan State players and staff back to East Lansing. Watts-Jackson would not get on any of them. He broke his left hip while being tackled on the final play and spent the night at the University of Michigan Medical Center. Dantonio walked through the parking lot carrying a Kentucky Fried Chicken box and a bottle of water. He climbed the steps and sat in the front row of bus number 1.

Above the end zone where Watts-Jackson scored, the corners of the video board were still lit with two small details: 17 seconds on the play clock, 0:00 on the game clock. The big screen was black.

WHEN DANTONIO arrived home, Izzo stopped by. Dantonio picked up his iPad and showed Izzo the film of the final play. Two of the finest coaches in their sports marveled at what had transpired. They told each other, “So many things had to happen.”

The snap had to be low. O’Neill had to fumble it. He had to try punting instead of covering the ball. The ball had to go sideways, but not out-of-bounds. Watts-Jackson had to pick it up cleanly. Michigan cornerback Wayne Lyons had to put his hand on Michigan State junior Jermaine Edmondson, inadvertently alerting Edmondson to block Lyons. Watts-Jackson had to make it all the way to the end zone. Dantonio had to believe he could build a national power at Michigan State. His players had to believe he was right. □



THEY CALLED HIM the Package, because he contained so many gifts, and because people always seemed to be waiting for him. Lamar Odom would bolt unannounced from

the University of Rhode Island's campus, turn off his cellphone and check into a hotel so he could be alone. Three days later he'd call head coach Jim Harrick. "This is the Package," he'd say. "The Package has arrived." One of those many gifts is his charm. Everybody laughed, as if the disappearances were a quirk and not a signal.

On Oct. 10, Odom vanished again, to a brothel 70 miles northwest of Las Vegas called the Love Ranch. But in truth he'd been gone much longer. For more than a year NBA sources who were once close to Odom had shared concerns about him. Among the laments: *Nobody knows where he is. . . . He won't return anybody's calls. . . . He keeps changing his number. . . . He says we'll get together and he doesn't follow through. . . . I'm worried.* Sightings on TMZ and at 24 Hour Fitness in L.A.'s San Fernando Valley did little to quell the anxiety.

The world waits again for the Package, feverishly refreshing gossip websites as he lies in intensive care at Sunrise Hospital in Las Vegas, reportedly breathing on his own and speaking after he was found unconscious in the brothel with cocaine, alcohol and herbal stimulants in his system. Trauma has followed Odom since he was 12 and his mother died of colon cancer, sending him sprinting into the streets of Queens, N.Y., until he reached Lincoln Park and shot jumpers all night. His father was a heroin addict, so he was raised by his Grandma Mildred,

who died in 2003. Three years later, to the day, Odom's six-month-old son, Jayden, died of SIDS. Some people are able to push past their personal catastrophes. Odom clung to his ghosts, staring at photographs of dead relatives every morning, then scrawling their names on his sneakers in the locker room before games.

Beyond his 6' 10" frame, his sublime handle and his joyful countenance, misfortune became his identity. He fashioned himself into a tragic figure, buying a white Mercedes because that was the car Lloyd Daniels drove the day they met. Daniels, one of the most celebrated players ever to come out of New York City, went to rehab three times, was arrested in one drug deal and survived a shooting in another. "People used to call me Little Lloyd," Odom once said from behind the wheel of his own pearly Benz.

He experienced the worst of urban America and grassroots basketball, that familiar but devastating one-two punch. A playground prodigy, bought and sold by coaches and runners before he turned 18, Odom attended three high schools and sparked two NCAA investigations. He declared for the draft after a year at Rhode Island—where he wore his first backpack—but reconsidered and tried to pull out, recognizing he wasn't ready. Alas, he'd already signed with an agent. In 1999, when he was 21, the Clippers made Odom a captain, and in 2001 he violated the NBA's anti-drug policy twice in eight months.

Years later, during an autograph signing at an Orange County mall, a

LAMAR ODOM
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UP WITH
HIM AGAIN

BY LEE JENKINS

Photograph by
Bob Rosato for
Sports Illustrated

+ NBA

GIFTS AND GHOSTS



fan presented Odom with a card from his four years with the Clippers. Odom stared at the picture for a solid 20 seconds. “Look at that,” he cooed. “That’s me.” By then he was a Laker, and four months later, in June 2009, he’d be a champion. But he didn’t sell the story of his own transformation, perhaps because he didn’t buy it. “There’s a fine line between utopia and disaster,” one of his high school coaches, Bob Oliva, once said. Odom tiptoed that line with his size-16 hightops.

“Be nice to everybody,” his mother told him on her deathbed, and he followed those words as if they were gospel. He invited D-Leaguers to expensive dinners. He paid private school tuition for kids he’d never met. He incurred fines for holding up the Lakers’ bus so he could sign more autographs. He invested in one long-shot project after another, from a T-shirt line to a fancy restaurant. “No was not in his vocabulary,” an Odom confidant says.

His benevolent spirit earned him every benefit of the doubt. Questionable behavior was interpreted as lovable eccentricity. Blow off a meeting? Oh, that’s just Lamar. Report to camp hopelessly out of shape? Oh, that’s just Lamar. Skip out on the Mavericks following the All-Star break? Oh, that’s just Lamar. I once heard him ask a locker-room attendant to fetch \$60 worth of Red Bull. Again, Lamar.

He didn’t fork over money simply because he was generous. He did it also because he was needy. He craved connection, and the Kardashians provided the family he’d never had, until he discovered that their dynamic was nearly as dysfunctional as his own. Odom thought he was ready for the reality show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and its spinoff, *Khloé & Lamar*, and all the tabloid mania that came with them. After all, he was a Laker, a New Yorker, famous since he was 16. But there is a



WALK OF FAME

Odom, who memorialized his dead relatives by writing their names on his sneakers before games (above), found a family in the Kardashians but wasn’t prepared for the spotlight that came with wife Khloé (left).



ODOM TIPTOED THE “FINE LINE BETWEEN UTOPIA AND DISASTER” IN HIS SIZE-16 HIGHTOPS.

big difference between sports celebrity and Hollywood celebrity, and he underestimated the gap.

Those who know Odom best debate the thing that started his spiral: the shows or the trade. In December 2011 the Lakers sent Odom to New Orleans in a deal that netted Chris Paul. But the move was promptly vetoed by the league office, and when the Lakers tried to welcome Odom back, he recoiled. L.A. shipped him to Dallas, and the plunge began. Over two frenzied weeks in ’13, he went missing for 72 hours, was arrested for DUI and was in a car accident. He checked in and out of rehab. Around the NBA, where Odom is as beloved as any player, his name

provoked dread: People worried that the next time they heard news, it would be worse.

He wound up in Las Vegas—appropriately, since that was where he entered the mainstream sports consciousness. He initially committed to play college basketball at UNLV, one of a thousand bad decisions, but he was kicked out before the fall semester of his freshman year over questions about the validity of his ACT score. Jerry DeGregorio, the college coach Odom calls “my white dad,” once said, “Putting Lamar in Vegas is like putting Orson Welles in a bakery.” The descriptions of Odom’s weekend at the ranch recall the film *Leaving Las Vegas*, in which an alcoholic played by Nicolas Cage drinks himself to death in the company of a prostitute. “I don’t know if I started drinking ’cause my wife left me or my wife left me ’cause I started drinking,” Cage’s character said. “But f--- it anyway.”

Odom could never hurt anybody but himself. I remember interviewing him on the Lakers’ practice court while E! cameramen flitted around us, filming for one of the Kardashian shows, in which he was featured as Khloé’s husband and sidekick. Odom covered his mouth. “Do you want to be on the show?” he whispered.

“O.K.,” I replied.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

Leave it to Lamar Odom to ask the follow-up question that everybody should have been posing to him. Strip away the size and the handle, the addictions and the demons, and you are left with the sweetest of souls.

It’s all part of the Package. □

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CLASSIN



NBA PREVIEW

KOBE BRYANT IS ONE OF THREE SUPERSTARS—ALL AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS—WHO IS PASSING ALONG HIS KNOWLEDGE TO A FREAKISHLY TALENTED ROOKIE. NOTEBOOKS OUT AND PENCILS READY, KIDS! THIS COULD GET INTENSE

BY LEE JENKINS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIFER POTTHEISER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (RUSSELL, TOWNS); ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BRYANT); TODD ROSENBERG FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GARNETT); BRIAN BABINEAU/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (WINSLOW); JEFFERY A. SALTER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WADE)

SESSION



TIMBERWOLVES

Kevin Garnett and
Karl-Anthony Towns

HEAT

Dwyane Wade and
Justise Winslow

LAKERS

Kobe Bryant and
D'Angelo Russell

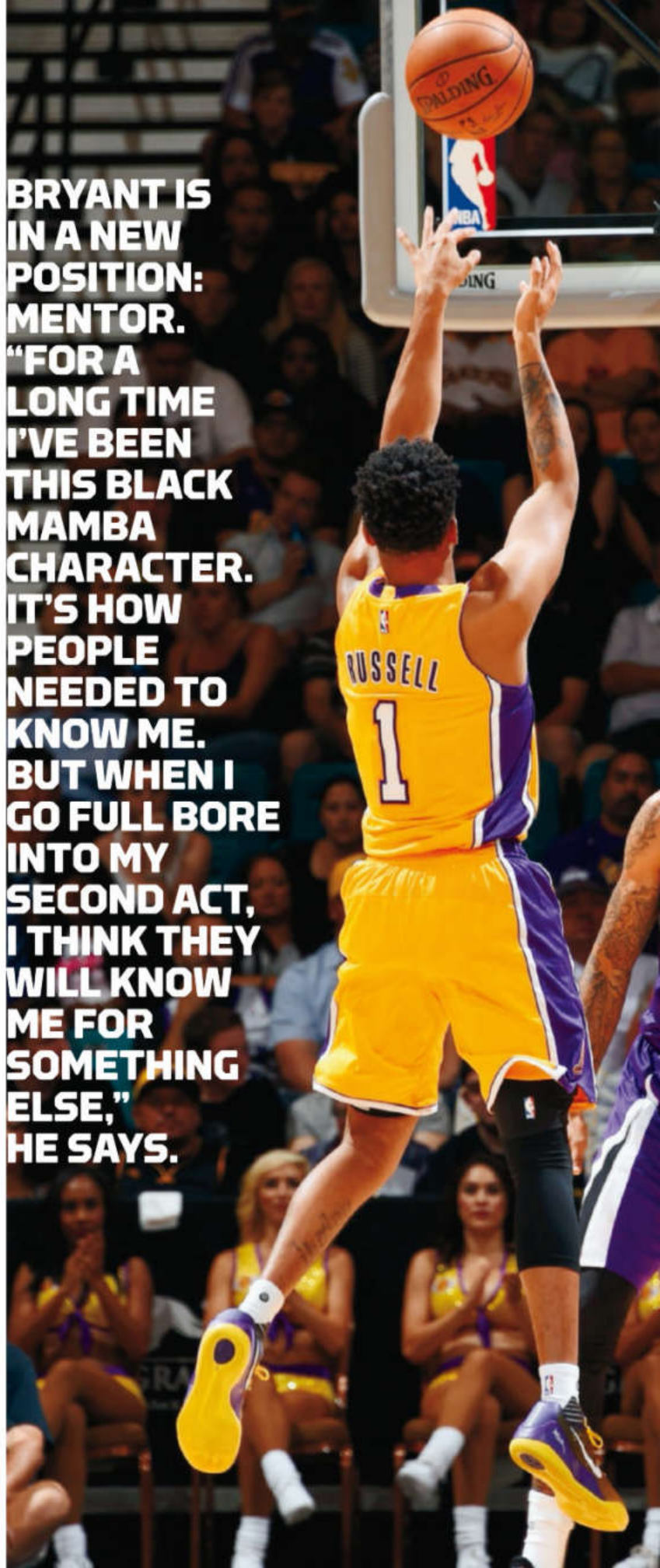
T

THE BLACK Chevy Suburban slogged through the wet side streets of Honolulu's Mo'ili'ili neighborhood, turning into one traffic snag after another and providing the 19-year-old passenger in the middle row ample time to choose his words. *What do I say?* D'Angelo Russell wondered. *What do I ask? I want to be myself, but I also don't want to mess anything up.*

Three summers ago Russell watched the U.S. Olympic basketball team practice in Las Vegas, and afterward the players walked over to the fans—all except Kobe Bryant, who sank into a chair apart from the crowd. “That’s Kobe,” a few spectators muttered. “He’s a jerk.” Maybe they were right. Maybe he *was* a jerk. Or maybe, Russell suggested, he was just tired.

Since that day in Vegas, Bryant has torn his left Achilles tendon, broken a bone in his left knee and ravaged his right rotator cuff, season-ending injuries all. Meanwhile Russell has graduated from Montverde Academy in Florida, spent a year threading no-look passes at Ohio State, become the second pick of the 2015 draft and wound up on the same team as Bryant, in the same SUV, on the way to the same Waikiki Beach hotel. “I try to act tough like, ‘Oh, it’s Kobe, whatever,’” Russell says. But during the Lakers’ six-hour flight to Honolulu for training camp, the wiry point guard kept turning his head toward the back of the plane, and in three-man drills

**BRYANT IS
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HE SAYS.**





ADAM ROZMAN/GETTY IMAGES (RUSSELL SHOOTING); ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BRYANT AND RUSSELL)

TOUGH COURSE

Russell, who was an infant when Bryant was a rookie, says he doesn't want a teacher who's "going to make anything easy."



at Stan Sheriff Center his eyes kept wandering toward the wing: *Yeah, there's Kobe.* He tried to shrug.

Russell was seven months old when Bryant arrived in Honolulu for his first Lakers camp, which happened to be Byron Scott's last as a player. "What do you want to accomplish?" Scott asked the rookie. "I want to be the best player in the league," Bryant replied, his left wrist still bandaged because he'd broken it in a pickup game at Venice Beach. He was cocky but curious. He

asked a hundred questions, of teammates but also of opponents. He once asked Michael Jordan at a stoppage about the release angle on his fadeaway. He noticed, from the way Jordan crinkled his brow, that he'd earned a sliver of respect. Nearly two decades later Bryant sat next to Russell in the middle row of the Suburban, waiting for the kid to ask a question of his own.

"He asked me if I was nervous when I started," Bryant says. "He asked that because he doesn't want to be one of those players you forget about in 10 years. He wanted to know, Why does that happen? How can I make sure that doesn't happen to me?" Like an unplugged

uncle, Bryant is at a stage where you can ask him almost anything—from the release angle on his fadeaway to the secret of life—and he will talk for 10 minutes. Russell didn't need to sweat the question. Anything goes.

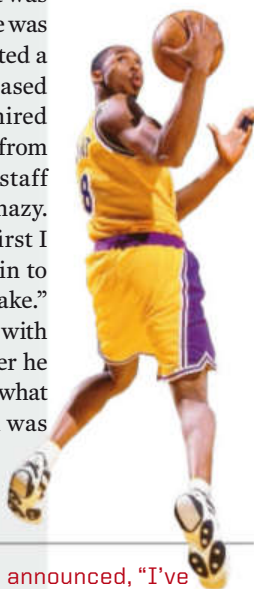
"I told him, 'If you love the game, then you've already won,'" Bryant says. "You can't be beat. Because the reality is, a lot of guys don't love it. When I came here in 1996, I had the butterflies, and then when I got around everybody, it was like, Oh, I'm fine. Some of these guys don't love the game. I thought they did. They don't. It's a job for them. And when something is a job, you can have success for a week, two weeks, a month, maybe a year, maybe even two. Then you'll fall. It's inevitable. But if you love it, you can't be stopped. Because when you love something, you'll always come back to it. You'll always keep asking questions, and finding answers, and getting in the gym."

"Some people try to balance that love with other interests, but there's no such thing as balance, my man. Either you want to be one of the greats, and you understand the sacrifices that come with it and deal with them, or you don't want to deal with them and you want to be in the middle of the pack. Michael never

worked a day in his life. He loved it. Same with Magic. He loved it. You play well, the attention is going to come, the endorsements are going to come. You play bad, the critiques are going to come, the naysayers are going to come. Don't worry about that. Just stay focused on the love.' ”

OVER THE past two years, when Bryant was not rehabbing his many broken parts, he was searching for his second love. He started a business, called Kobe Inc., and purchased an office building in Newport Beach, Calif. He hired four employees, including two former executives from Gatorade and Nike, and presided over weekly staff meetings. But the company's purpose remained hazy. “I read, I studied, I dabbled,” Bryant says. “At first I thought, What's the biggest industry I can get in to generate the most revenue? That was a huge mistake.”

One day Bryant was brainstorming in the office with Simon Sinek, an author and motivational speaker he admires. “Off the top of your head,” Sinek asked, “what is the most fun thing you've ever done?” Sinek was



THROWBACK: KOBE THE ROOKIE

Pre-NBA hype Caused a stir in 1996 when he announced, “I've decided to skip college and take my talent to the NBA.” (Sound familiar?) No guard had ever made the jump from high school, and Bryant lasted until the 13th pick, when the Hornets selected him and shipped him to the Lakers for center Vlade Divac.

Veteran presence Bryant's first Lakers team featured two guards who would become NBA coaches: Derek Fisher (who, like Bryant, was a rookie) and Byron Scott (who is now Kobe's boss). But the focal point was another newcomer to L.A.: 24-year-old Shaquille O'Neal.

Early returns Backed up Eddie Jones and Nick Van Exel in '96-'97, starting six times and averaging 7.6 points on 41.7% shooting for a 56-win team that lost in the second round of the playoffs.

treated to an even more elaborate answer than Russell.

“The first person I thought of was Jeanne Mastriano, my great speaking-arts teacher at Lower Merion [High in Pennsylvania],” Bryant says. “Senior year, English class, we had an assignment to invent a story and tell it to the kindergartners. I forgot about the assignment. So the day comes, we're all walking down to kindergarten, and I was like, What are we doing? Then it dawned on me. *Oh s---, I have to think of a story.* So I came up with one on the fly about a kid who never cleaned his room—because my bedroom was a mess that morning. The kid's mom was always on him. Then

one night all the socks and shoes and toys on the floor came to life and turned into monsters, and they scared the daylights out of the kid.” For months afterward the kindergartners giggled when they saw him, and the parents thanked him for instilling order in their homes. That was it, Kobe told Sinek. That was the most fun thing.

“What I love,” Bryant says, “is storytelling. I love the idea of creative content—whether it's mythology or animation, written or film—that can inspire people and give them something tangible they can use in their own lives. I call it creative education. The best way to teach isn't by preaching to somebody. It's by sharing stories. I'm trying to build my whole business off that concept.”

In February, Bryant released a documentary called *Kobe Bryant's Muse*, which aired on Showtime and earned a bronze Clio Sports Award. Last month, as Bryant flew home to Orange County from a speaking engagement at Nike's headquarters outside Portland, a tsunami advisory was issued for Newport Beach. Bryant was petrified, but not because he would have to fly into the storm. “I have to get my damn Clio!” he told his companions. When he landed, he drove straight to the office and fetched the award, taking it home for safekeeping. “That trophy means more to me than any trophy I've ever won,” Bryant says.

He sounds, in those moments, ready to retire from basketball. He's won five NBA titles, been to 17 All-Star Games, scored more points than Jordan. But then here comes Russell, a darting, probing reminder of the one thing he hasn't accomplished. If Bryant bailed tomorrow, he would leave without a successor to carry his mantle and extol his influence, as much a part of an athlete's legacy as his ring count. There would be no young headliner in purple and gold to defend Bryant against the tired but inevitable charge that he was lacking as a teammate and leader. There would be no one to talk about him the way he talks about Mrs. Mastriano. Bryant is a renowned student of the game, but Russell represents what might be his last chance to teach, which is why the stakes for this season are high, even if the Lakers' odds of making the playoffs remain low.

Bryant wants to leave an imprint on the next generation, and in his defense, he hasn't had many opportunities. Over his first 17 years in the league the Lakers picked in the lottery only once, selecting oddball center Andrew Bynum 10th in 2005. In the spring of 2014 they chose power forward Julius Randle seventh, and when he broke his leg on opening night, it was Bryant who hovered over him and whispered in his ear. “I could feel his presence,” Randle says. “And then later he sent me the text that got me out of the somber mood I was in. His encouragement was what helped me come back.”

Randle is important to the Lakers' future, but Russell is critical, and Bryant has spent considerable time pondering how he can relate to a sidekick so young. "I've thought about that all summer," Bryant says, "because this is a generation that I've completely missed. What music do they listen to? What are they interested in? I don't really know." Bryant, for his part, enjoys visiting the sets of television shows in his spare time and watching the different ways actors transform into their characters. "Have you ever done anything like that?" he asks Russell.

"I've been to the ESPN car wash," the rookie replies.

There is a lot of work to do, and not much time to do it. Bryant is 37, in the last year of his contract and maybe the last year of his career. His future will probably be determined by his health. But Russell, and whatever satisfaction Bryant derives from grooming him, will play a role. "The student is always a teacher," Bryant says, "and the teacher is always a student." He is not the type of tutor who will hand out stickers and straight A's. He will follow the same instincts that guided him with those Lower Merion kindergartners. "What I'm going to do," Bryant says, "is share my story."

RUSSELL KNOWS much of it already. "Favorite Kobe Bryant memory?" he says. "Utah series, '97, when he shot the air balls." Never mind that Russell was one year old when the Lakers' precocious rookie unleashed those four fruitless heaves in crunch time of an elimination-game loss to the Jazz. "I love that moment because of how he reacted afterward, how he drove down to UCLA and looked at the [students there] and wondered, Did I make the wrong decision?" Russell says. "That's when he really took off. He kept shooting. I'm sure I'll have the same kind of moment, when I wonder if I should have stayed in college, if I should have stayed the man for a little longer. I'll keep shooting too."

Russell had a brutal summer league. His body was sore and his stroke was off, and when the team ran



FOOT NOTES

Bryant has been giving Russell tips on virtually everything—including his shoes, which Bryant deemed too cheap to offer support.

wind sprints, shooting guard Jordan Clarkson lapped him. "That can't happen," Lakers general manager Mitch Kupchak told the bonus baby. Russell promptly moved to L.A., and when Kupchak looked out his office window every day, he saw Russell's legs churning on the practice court.

Behind his starstruck facade, Russell possesses an edge Bryant can appreciate. He publicly lobbied the Lakers to draft him, begging for the pressure—and the punishment. "So many people feed you that b.s.," Russell says. "Kobe is going to give you the real thing. He's not going to make anything easy, and I don't want it easy. He's not some soft, nice guy, so why would he pass his torch to some soft, nice guy who doesn't have that killer in him, that dog in him? I know I got it in me."

Russell is from Louisville, and his high school coach, Doug Bibby, was Rajon Rondo's high school coach. Russell yearned for Rondo's approval, perhaps too desperately. "Every time he came around, I never performed like I would have if he wasn't there," Russell says. "I put a lot of pressure on myself. Also, Rondo isn't that much of a people person. Kobe is." In 2015, that may be true. "I had a big transition when I started to understand that my teammates viewed me like some damn machine who didn't feel anything and was oblivious to pressure," Bryant says. "They found that very unrelatable. I had to explain that I had the same fears, flaws, vulnerabilities, so they could relate to me." He is referring to former Lakers such as Lamar Odom and Luke Walton, Shannon Brown and Ronny Turiaf, who came to treasure Bryant for reasons that transcend assists.

"People who have very limited knowledge of sports always say, 'Passing the ball makes everyone better,'" says Bryant. "No. That's not it. That's not making them better. That's giving them an opportunity to be successful. If you want to make them better, you don't just hand them the ball. You inspire them to be the best version of themselves, and I do that by sharing things which are very personal to me, things I've struggled with, and letting them relate that to their own journey."

With Russell, Bryant started a different way. "He doesn't like my shoes," Russell mentioned after the first day of training camp. "He said the material is cheap and won't support my feet." The rookie immediately changed kicks but still reported a bruised right foot two days later. Despite the injury, he refused to skip a practice. Maybe he would have done the same thing back at Ohio State—or maybe he knew that Bryant hoisted jumpers last season the morning of his shoulder surgery ("It doesn't really hurt that bad," he told incredulous staffers) and that Bryant was working out in the gym at the Hilton Hawaiian Village at 5 a.m. "All that stuff filters down," says Kupchak, who played in Washington with Wes Unseld and still cringes when he recalls

the agony Unseld endured to keep hitting the glass.

In this Age of Calipari, when the best prospects are rarely older than 19, influential veterans have become vital. “These kids have no idea what being a professional is all about,” Kupchak says. “How would they know? They’re blank slates. Maybe something is scribbled on there, but it’s not in indelible ink.” Russell isn’t a locomotive like Derrick Rose, nor is he a sniper like Steph Curry. He is a methodical playmaker, in the mold of James Harden, who must use his 6’ 5” frame to reach his spots. Bryant, one of the finest shot creators in NBA history, pulls him aside to demonstrate tricks. Russell already offers a hilarious impersonation of a Bryant fadeaway, with no fewer than six pump fakes.

Kupchak wants to buy the Kobe-as-mentor story line, but he knows better than to count on it. “He does want to teach,” Kupchak says. “He is aware of the legacy issues. And he’s so much more patient than he used to be. But he’s still such an instinctive competitor, at some point that patience runs out and those instincts kick in: *I gave them their chance, and it’s time to take over because I can do it better than anybody else.*” It was only 10 months ago that Bryant stormed out of a practice, sniping at Kupchak, “These motherf----- ain’t doing s--- for me.” As tough as Russell may be, a repeat performance would shake any teenager’s confidence.

“It’s much more like juggling eggs,” Bryant says. “You have to handle them with care because you don’t want them to fall and crack.” Traditionally, he is not a man who juggles eggs. He is a man who tempers steel. “I know one gear, and I’m not very balanced in my life, which isn’t the healthiest way to be,” Bryant continues. “Some people like that approach and some people don’t, and that’s where the split happens, the hero/villain split. You need to have a villain, an antagonist, and for a long time I’ve been this black mamba character. It’s how people needed to know me. But when I go full bore into my second act, I think they will know me for something else.”

Kobe Bryant, storyteller, motivator, instructor. His vision for his company is still coming into focus, but he’d like to create biographical portraits of luminaries, probably in digital or video form. He may discover that few tales are as rich as his own. “No,” Bryant protests. “I guarantee if I dig into your story—Why do you do what you do? What was your seed? What were the trials that led you to where you are?—I’ll pull something that’s pretty f----- powerful. Pretty f----- powerful.”

But that’s for another year. The most relevant story in this Lakers season is D’Angelo Russell’s. Someday he will be asked about the transformative experience of his young career, being Kobe Bryant’s rook. His response will have implications for both. He has to love it. □



THE KID AND KAT

MINNESOTA'S GREATEST PLAYER
HAS SET HIS SIGHTS ON BEING
THE GREATEST TEAMMATE



JORDAN JOHNSON/NBA/GETTY IMAGES (TOWNS); TODD ROSENBERG FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GARRETT AND TOWNS)



AFTER THE TIMBERWOLVES selected Karl-Anthony Towns with the first pick in the 2015 draft, after they treated him to a round at Hazeltine National (where he nearly drove the 452-yard 10th, cutting the dogleg) and after they created a home in the new practice facility for his imaginary friend (a custom sculpture of Karlito lives in the communications office, under lock and key), the 19-year-old man-child politely issued one more request. “The old jerseys,” he said, “with the trees around the neck.”

He wanted T-Wolves throwbacks, only the team doesn’t make those anymore, and Mitchell & Ness charges \$200 apiece. The price does not seem prohibitive for someone who earns nearly \$5 million a year until you realize that Towns remains—how to put this politely—a cheapskate. A prolific coupon clipper as a kid in Piscataway, N.J., he still refuses to buy a car, instead walking from his apartment in downtown Minneapolis to local restaurants. “Isn’t that the No. 1 pick?” passersby mutter incredulously.

SHEEP IN T-WOLVES’ CLOTHING

Towns may never have KG’s fire, but they share an intense dedication to their craft.

They won’t have to wonder much longer because Minnesota agreed to foot the bill for the retro jerseys, stitched with Towns’s name and number 32, so he’ll be in uniform on and off the court. “To add the shorts,” Towns pressed, “would I get charged?”

Resisting his charm, as the T-Wolves are discovering, is futile. Towns is a 6’ 11”, 244-pound prodigy who was attending shoe-sponsored camps when he was eight and guarding Kevin Durant in the summer when he was 16. But he also taught himself to play piano, golf and Ultimate Frisbee. He lists Len Bias as his favorite athlete, never mind that Bias died almost a decade before he was born. “I’ve got a Bias jersey too,” Towns mentions with a wink.

Kat, as he is known, winks often and smiles constantly, whether he just chucked an air ball or drilled an 18-foot fadeaway. “I was raised to smile,” he says. “I’m a smiling kind of guy. I like to joke around, be lighthearted, not take things too seriously.” His joyful countenance bears little resemblance to the former wunderkind who has been tabbed to mentor him, the one who bangs his head against the basket stanchion before games, who releases primal screams at the sight of loose balls and who made that jersey with the foliage on the collar so desirable in the first place.

ON THE day Kevin Garnett returned to Minnesota last season, acquired from the Nets in February, he told general manager Milt Newton, “I want to be known as the best teammate ever.” Garnett, who molded Rajon Rondo and Kendrick Perkins in Boston, was joining a locker room with three vaunted swingmen under 23: Andrew Wiggins, Zach LaVine and Shabazz Muhammad. Coach Flip Saunders predicted Garnett would flush their cellphones down the toilet. Instead, he disarmed the young Timberwolves, cordially introducing himself to each one. “You heard about how intimidating he was,” says LaVine, Minnesota’s first-round pick in 2014. “It wasn’t like that at all.”

Then practice started, and Garnett narrated every action with the voice of God, a baritone so booming you can hear the expletives through closed doors. “Is he serious?” one player asked assistant coach Sidney Lowe. “Is he really like this every day?” Lowe, who coached Garnett during his first tour in the Twin Cities, stifled a laugh. “Every day,” he replied.

Four months later the T-Wolves drafted a genial giant out of Kentucky who leads fast breaks, tosses alley-oops and throws down double-pump reverse dunks, a boundless skill set few big men have possessed since the 6’ 11” Garnett emerged from Farragut Career Academy in Chicago 20 years ago. Garnett pulled Towns aside after his predraft workout at Target Center and again at the Las Vegas Summer League. Conversations with KG are rarely casual. When he speaks, he leans forward, head bobbing and eyes bulging. He touches your arm to

punctuate his points. He is a yeller, but it is important not to confuse volume for anger. Garnett is relentlessly supportive of young players, buying them suits so they don't look like they're in college anymore, and taking their 4 a.m. phone calls because he never seems to sleep.

So what exactly is he teaching Towns? "Everything," the rookie says. Moving faster to triple-threat position on offense, getting lower on defense, keeping his balance, attacking his man, protecting the weak side, identifying the back screen and communicating until he goes hoarse. Sam Mitchell, serving as coach while Saunders battles Hodgkin's lymphoma, often turns practice over to Garnett for five-minute stretches. "We talk!" he hollered on the first day of training camp, while tugging Towns's jersey. "Bigs always talk to each other! Feel me? We always on the same line!" During a recent scrimmage Karl Towns Sr. watched his son trade body blows in the post with center Gorgui Dieng. "He's not backing down," Towns Sr. said. "He's listening to KG."

In Boston, Rondo and Perkins took on Garnett's seething persona, but there is no way to predict how the happy-go-lucky Towns will respond. "They're such a study in contrast," says one NBA general manager.

THROWBACK: KG THE ROOKIE

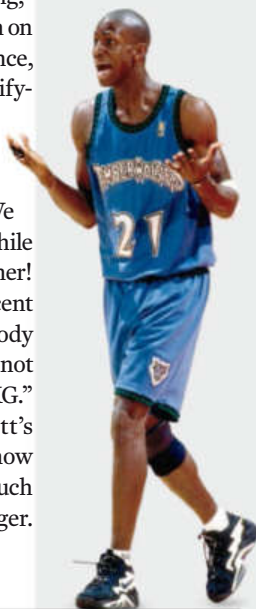
Hype Appeared on the June 26, 1995, cover of *Sports Illustrated*, two days before the Timberwolves took him fifth, making him the first player to go straight from high school to the NBA since 1975.

Veteran presence Coming off a 21-win season, Minnesota added several experienced players to a young team, including two future coaches: Terry Porter and Sam Mitchell (now the T-Wolves' interim coach). The squad's top scorer: Isaiah Rider.

Early returns Started half the season, averaging 10.4 points and finishing second on the team to forward Tom Gugliotta in win shares. Minnesota was back in the lottery after going 26-56.

"It's going to be a very interesting marriage." The differences are superficial, and in Garnett's estimation, insignificant. "Don't take the smile for a weakness," he warns. "[Karl] plays with another type of engine." Towns exhibits, through the ferocious way he patrols the paint and runs the floor, plenty of what Timberwolves coaches call *the inner thing*. "The place KG and I really meet is in the passion we have for the craft," Towns says.

They share at least one mannerism, too. Both players talk to themselves, and while no one in his right mind would ever mock Garnett for it, Kentucky coaches felt free to ridicule Towns. "He's talking to his imaginary friend!" former Wildcats assistant Barry Rohrsen cracked at a practice last season. Karlito was born, and Towns,



perhaps sensing a future marketing opportunity, was delighted. No word on whether Garnett has an imaginary friend—the Little Ticket?—but in a recent photo shoot with Towns he suggested a twist on their default expressions. Kat scowled, KG beamed. Then Garnett threw the rook in what was supposed to be a playful headlock. "Dude!" Towns yelled. Garnett loosened his grip.

Young squads like to add veteran influences, but the Timberwolves have taken that strategy to an extreme. They now employ an elder statesman for each position group—Garnett, 39; point guard Andre Miller, 39; wing Tayshaun Prince, 35—so every prospect has a guide. The T-Wolves are a team of freshmen and senior citizens. It's hard to find anybody in his prime. They recall the Thunder, circa 2009, so it was appropriate that their first preseason opponent at the Target Center was Oklahoma City. Garnett sat on the end of the bench during player introductions, head already lacquered with sweat, staring at the floor. His entire body seemed to be vibrating. He never looked up, wordlessly raising his right fist every time a teammate was introduced, waiting for a pound. When LaVine was announced, he ran straight to the court, unintentionally bypassing Garnett. Towns would not make the same mistake. He would not leave KG hanging.

THE BEST seat in an NBA arena this season, unless you are accompanied by a small child, is the one next to the Minnesota bench. Here is a brief sampling of the Garnett sound track from the Oklahoma City game, which, it bears repeating, did not actually count. To point guard Lorenzo Brown: "You're by yourself, Zo! To your right, Zo! Yeah, Zo!" To Dieng: "Sit down, G! Two-man game, G! Good job, G!" To Towns: "Hurry up, Kat! Get back, Kat! Stop the ball, Kat!" To a referee, after a questionable foul: "We're all in preseason form!" After a Thunder air ball: "That's a terrible shot!" After a Thunder dunk: "Oh, no! Oh, s---!" He never shuts up, writhing when the Timberwolves allowed a bucket and howling when they forced a brick. At one point an amused T-Wolves veteran turned to a reporter and joked, "KG is *crazy*." Perhaps, but they'd better listen to him. The day Garnett retires, he is expected to become part owner of the franchise, a highly animated boss.

Near the end of the second quarter something happened that got him even more excited. Brown clanked a free throw and Towns corralled the offensive rebound. Instead of retreating for a jumper or rising for a jump hook, both of which are staples in his arsenal, the rookie hurtled toward the rim and jackhammered a vicious dunk over 6' 10" Mitch McGary. Garnett leaped from his chair, stomping his feet and snapping his towel. The Big Kat and the Big Ticket, an odd but promising pair, locked eyes and screamed. □



JUSTISE IS SERVED

ONCE MENTORED BY A FOE, D-WADE IS PAYING IT FORWARD TO HIS POTENTIAL SUCCESSOR

→ **DWYANE WADE** was in his first season with the Heat, auditioning as a point guard, and Baron Davis was in his fifth with the Hornets, ensconced as one. They met during a stoppage in play, an awkward time for an introduction, but a surprisingly common one. “There was a possession where I came down and set up a pick-and-roll,” Wade recalls. “I took the ball down pretty far, and at the next break Baron pulled me aside. He told me, ‘You know, you should think about setting that up higher on the court where you have more room to operate, more angles, and you can take advantage of your speed. When you get low like that, you can only go one way, and the defense can bottle you up.’” Wade wondered if he was the victim of a rookie prank. But the punch line never came. “The whole conversation blew my mind,” Wade says. “Here we are, in the middle of competing against each other, and this guy is trying to *help me*.”

Wade thinks of that exchange often, because it inspired him to master the high pick-and-roll, a set that’s become lifeblood for playmakers everywhere. But he also thinks about it for another reason. “One thing you learn early on in this league is that people share,” Wade says. “They reach out, and over time you reach out as well. We all become teachers because, like it or not, the game will go on way beyond us.” Modern stars are often lampooned for their incessant hobnobbing, but Wade describes similar brushes with Kobe Bryant, Kevin Garnett and

THREE’S COMPANY

The paternalistic Wade has a new understudy in Winslow, who boasts an eerily similar skill set and an appetite for instruction.



Jason Kidd, not exactly new-age softies. “Part of the job,” Wade says, “is passing down what you know.”

IT IS a Friday afternoon in mid-October, and Wade is crouched on the right block, forearm pressed into Justise Winslow’s kidneys. Heat practice is over, except for Winslow, a 19-year-old rookie backing down a legend. The brawny southpaw takes two dribbles toward the middle and rises for a lefty jump hook. Wade asks him to do it again. Two dribbles, jump hook. Wade wants to see it again. Two dribbles, jump hook. And again. Two dribbles, jump hook. Wade believes this can be Winslow’s go-to move, the foundation for his entire post arsenal, but he barely looks at the shot. He is preoccupied with the shoulders. “When I started going into the post, I would try to bang and bang, leading with my shoulder,” Wade says. “That’s a foul. I had to learn to use my hips. That’s what we’re talking about now, ways to use your strength without your shoulders. Once he gets that, I’ll give him something else.”

Twelve years into his career Wade can relate to Baron

THROWBACK: D-WADE THE ROOKIE

Pre-NBA hype Boosted his stock in a big way by leading Marquette to the 2003 Final Four, thanks to a triple double against top-seeded Kentucky in the regional finals. Declared for the draft after that season as a 21-year-old junior and went fifth.

Veteran presence Played alongside 32-year-old Eddie Jones (sound familiar?) on a Heat team light on star power. Jones and Lamar Odom finished one-two in scoring.

Early returns Scored 16.2 points per game in an injury-plagued regular season (sound familiar?), then led the Heat in scoring with 18.0 during their run to the Eastern Conference semis.



Davis. He and Winslow are teammates, but in a larger sense they are competitors, or they will be. Wade is just 33, and he averaged 21.5 points last season, but injuries kept him out of 20 games, and the Heat gave him a one-year contract extension last summer. If all goes as planned, the 6' 7" Winslow will eventually succeed him. So why would Wade help hasten the process? “His time is going to come,” Wade laughs, “and you can’t stop it. You can try to keep it off for as long as you’re out there, but when it’s time, it’s time, and at the end of the day I want the best for this organization. I want to watch him for years to come and think of all the things we did this season. He doesn’t have to be the player I am, but if we have any similarities, let’s make him great at those.”

Heat coaches marvel at how much Wade and Winslow

have in common: physical wings with the strength to post up guards and the speed to drive past forwards. After leading Duke to the national title, Winslow fell to 10th in the draft because of concerns about his shot, reminiscent of the doubts that accompanied Wade from Marquette when the Heat chose him fifth in 2003. He smoothed out his midrange stroke and three years later captured the first of his three titles. “What if people had brushed me to the side early on?” Wade says. “But they stayed confident in me.” When Winslow arrived in Miami, Wade promptly invited him to his house for lunch.

Wade, who is raising four kids and wrote a book about fatherhood, has many philosophies on nurturing young men. Some translate from living room to locker room. Others don’t. “I think it helps to understand that kids today are different and you can’t talk to them the way I was talked to,” Wade says. “You have to be able to push guys without them feeling like you’re *pushing guys*. I try to tell them, ‘This isn’t for me. This is for you. I’m not going to force it. But I’m here for you when you’re ready to come to me.’” Few blue-chippers have taken him up on it. The last time the Heat picked in the lottery, they chose Michael Beasley, a flaky power forward, in 2008. Beasley needed guidance, but he didn’t play Wade’s position, and after two disappointing seasons he was gone.

“Certain times you worry about how *your* body is feeling, how *your* game is doing, and then you’ve got these younger guys who are not as mature,” Wade says. “But this is a team, and no matter if you’re 37 like Birdman [Chris Andersen] or 19 like Justise, we need everybody.” Maybe Winslow will someday take Wade’s job. Or maybe he’ll help him win his fourth ring. Or maybe he’ll do both, a deal Wade would gladly strike. For now, Winslow will come off the bench with a contender, benefiting from time and tutelage Wade never enjoyed.

As Wade conducted his jump hook tutorial on a practice court at AmericanAirlines Arena, associate head coach David Fizdale fed bounce passes to Winslow and listened. “Dwyane’s not just showing him how to beast,” Fizdale says. “He’s making him understand why you do what you do. He’s asking, ‘Why are you posting up? Probably because you’re bigger than the guy guarding you. So what will that guy do in response? Probably try to strip you. And what do you do if they switch a bigger guy onto you? Probably face up and use your speed.’”

Winslow, thoughtful and serious, nodded silently. “I’m not trying to be a pest and bother him,” he says. But after they finished, Winslow asked the video staff for cut-ups of his post moves spliced with Wade’s. He is partial to footage from Game 4 of the ’06 Finals. “That will make it real,” he says. “I’m not necessarily trying to be the No. 1 guy or the top scorer. I’m trying to grow into that role, and 10 years from now I’ll have a rookie and help somebody else learn, and it all keeps going.” □

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A full-page photograph of a basketball game in progress. In the foreground, a Detroit Pistons player (Ilyasova, #23) is seen from the back, wearing a blue jersey with red and white accents. In the center, another Pistons player is in motion. In the background, a San Antonio Spurs player (Manu Ginobili, #20) is visible. The arena is filled with spectators. The title "NBA PREVIEW" is at the top, and "ADAPT OR DIE" is in large white letters across the middle. A paragraph of text and a byline are on the right. A scoreboard at the bottom shows the game between Detroit and San Antonio.

NBA PREVIEW

ADAPT OR DIE

HIGH-USAGE, HEAVY-SHOOTING STARS USUALLY DON'T CONSIDER THE SPURS, WHO HATE SPENDING BIG FOR FREE AGENTS. BUT IT'S NO HOLDS BARRED WHEN IT COMES TO THE CHASE FOR AN NBA TITLE—AND BY ADDING LAMARCUS ALDRIDGE, SAN ANTONIO IS ONCE AGAIN A CONTENDER

BY CHRIS MANNIX

Photographs by Greg Nelson
For Sports Illustrated

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AIMING HIGHER

After having little playoff success in nine seasons with the Blazers, Aldridge cast his lot with the Spurs, who have won five titles since 1999.

A

AS THE PRIVATE jet lifted off the sun-scorched Los Angeles runway, Ime Udoka fidgeted in a plush leather seat, determined to change the NBA landscape by the time the plane landed. It was July 3, three days into the league's free-agency frenzy, and the then 37-year-old former Spurs forward and current assistant coach was San Antonio's strongest connection to the off-season's biggest prize: Blazers forward LaMarcus Aldridge. The Spurs' recruitment of Aldridge had already been strong. Two days earlier a San Antonio contingent, headlined by Gregg Popovich, Tim Duncan and Tony Parker, had left a powerful impression on Aldridge during their first meeting. There was no elaborate presentation and no empty promises—just an honest conversation about how Aldridge would fit in.

When Aldridge asked how the team planned to use him, Popovich pointed to Duncan, the franchise's 39-year-old, 6' 11", 248-pound veteran stalwart. In Duncan's prime the Spurs ran a steady diet of pick-and-rolls and post-ups. Pop said he envisioned using the 6' 11", 240-pound Aldridge the same way. Aldridge inquired about his production. San Antonio has had only one 20-point-per-game scorer in the last six seasons. Aldridge, a four-time All-Star as a Blazer, has averaged at least 21 points in each of the last five. While he made no promises, Pop assured him that he would have every opportunity to get his numbers. Aldridge, who had surgery on his left thumb in May, then asked about the Spurs' medical team. At 30, he was beginning to think about his NBA mortality. That's when Spurs point guard Patty Mills, who also made the trip, jumped in. A teammate of Aldridge's for two years

in Portland, Mills—twice surgically repaired while with San Antonio—raved about his experiences with the team's medical staff. "You never want to get an injury," said Mills. "But if you do, what we have here is very good."

Everything was on the table. Well, almost everything. A question about past championships was met with a collective shrug. The Spurs didn't want to talk about the past, they wanted to talk about the future. "They were very straightforward," says Aldridge. "It wasn't—and excuse my language—a circle jerk."

Still, as well as the meeting had gone, no one with San Antonio felt that landing Aldridge was a done deal. The competition for him was fierce. The Suns had dazzled Aldridge with a brilliant marketing presentation reinforced by their aggressive recruitment of 7' 1" Tyson Chandler (who signed a four-year, \$52 million contract with Phoenix on July 9). And then there was Portland. Across the league, anyone who knows Aldridge knows that he doesn't like change. Even with all of their warts—Portland had won only one playoff series since 2009—the Blazers still had a shot.

So there was Udoka, hopping on a flight with Aldridge from L.A. to Dallas to make one last San Antonio sales pitch. For three hours the two men, friends and teammates since Udoka's lone season with the Blazers in 2006–07, talked basketball. Popovich was a frequent topic: In the days after his initial meeting with the Spurs' contingent, Aldridge was uneasy and grappled with the idea of playing for a coach whose teams



TEXAS TWO-STEP

Aldridge's productivity in the paint will lighten the load of the 39-year-old Duncan (above, right).

THE SPURS DIDN'T TITLES. THEY TAL

rarely featured one primary scorer and who pledged allegiance to the pass. He struggled to reconcile personal achievement with team success. His meetings with other teams further clouded his head. A common thread in those discussions was a bad-mouthing of how the Spurs would use Aldridge in their offense.

Aldridge called his then agent Arn Tellem (who has since joined the Pistons as vice chairman of Palace Sports & Entertainment). Tellem's solution? Meet with Pop again. So on July 3, Aldridge sat down with Popovich for lunch (later joined by Udoka and Spurs executive Sean Marks) in Beverly Hills. After more



T DWELL ON THEIR PAST KED ABOUT THE FUTURE.

reassurances, Aldridge left *this* meeting feeling better. Later, on the plane back to Dallas, Udoka reinforced the Spurs' agenda. "I told him, If you want to be coached, if you want to be challenged, Pop is the guy for you."

As the plane descended toward Dallas, Udoka still didn't know which way Aldridge was leaning. "I had a good feeling," says Udoka. "But you never know." As the two disembarked, Aldridge finally turned to Udoka. "I'm coming," he said.

"Just the best feeling," says Udoka. Hours later Aldridge tweeted the news to everyone. The Spurs signed Aldridge to a four-year, \$80 million contract (\$30 mil-

lion less than what Portland offered for the five-year maximum). San Antonio remained a title contender.

BURYING THE SPURS: It's a time-honored tradition for critics. Swept by the Suns in the conference semis in 2010? It's *over*. Bounced out of the first round of the playoffs by the Grizzlies in '11? *Time to rebuild*. When the Clippers ousted San Antonio in a brutal seven-game first-round series last spring, the vultures again circled. Duncan was pushing 40 and at the end of his contract; a nicked-up Manu Ginóbili, then 37, was too. Parker, now 33, was also battling injuries and looking a step slow. If a franchise reboot ever looked necessary, it was now.

Publicly, the Spurs are often nonchalant about the future of its aging core. Questions put to Popovich about rebuilding after a titleless season are usually met with a blank stare or a snarky, YouTube-worthy response. But privately, the months that followed the first-round loss to L.A. were anxious ones. Strategies, lots of them, were hatched for every possible scenario. Plan A was for everyone to come back, with a coveted free agent injected into the mix. But there were also Plans B, C and D. "We had a lot of different scenarios," said president and general manager R.C. Buford. "We really didn't know what was going to happen."

In June, Duncan called: "I'm coming back." The Spurs were already planning an aggressive pursuit of Aldridge. Now they could promise he'd play alongside a future Hall of Fame center. "Having Tim may have a big impact with LaMarcus," says Buford. "But it wouldn't have impacted our pursuit of LaMarcus."

For as much success as the Spurs have had—five championships since 1999, the highest winning percentage of any team in the four major sports since '97—free agents have been hard to come by. Maybe it's a Texas thing. The Mavericks have whiffed year after year trying to find a superstar sidekick for Dirk Nowitzki. The Rockets landed Dwight Howard in the summer of 2013, but they have Howard's poisonous relationship with Kobe Bryant to thank for that. In 2003, San Antonio's very public pursuit of Jason Kidd failed. And while the Spurs' superior drafting strategy often compromises its cap space, you are more likely to see Pop & Co. outsmart teams for cheap talent such as Mills or guard Danny Green, or resuscitate fading ones like power forward Boris Diaw, rather than land a player of Aldridge's caliber.

By contrast, for Aldridge, a Dallas native who played at Texas from 2004 to '06, the Lone Star State was what put San Antonio in the mix. "The appeal of Texas was something we had to recognize and, hopefully, take advantage of," says Buford. The Western Conference is a minefield. Reigning NBA champion Golden State is loaded with 20-somethings who are only going to

get better. With 2014 MVP Kevin Durant missing the majority of the season due to injuries to his right foot, the Thunder quietly restocked its roster. Houston added point guard Ty Lawson, the Clippers retained center DeAndre Jordan at the 11th hour, and the baby-faced, playoff-hopeful Pelicans and Jazz get better by the day.

Although Popovich (predictably) hates recruiting, he recognized the need to add a player like Aldridge. “This is a guy we really wanted,” says Popovich. “He’s shown he’s a consistent scorer. He’s a good teammate. He wins well, and he loses well. Both as a fiber guy and a talent guy, we thought he fit the bill.”

Still, for a team that treasures its chemistry, Aldridge comes with some risks. To Aldridge, the Spurs were unequivocal: They want you to score, but they want you to do it without disrupting the team’s successful ball-sharing system. Last season Aldridge’s usage rate—defined as the percentage of a team’s offensive possessions a player uses while on the court—was 30%, 11th highest of any starter, per NBA.com. The top Spur: Parker (24.7%), who checked in at 51st. “He’s used to getting the ball a lot,” says Popovich. “So what happens if we start running isolations? Timmy is going to fall asleep on the block. Kawhi is going to lose interest. Tony is going to say, ‘What about me?’ Manu is going to wonder why he is even on the court. I’m exaggerating, obviously, but they all have to find a way to fit together.”

It’s been suggested that Popovich should prepare for life with Aldridge by dusting off the old David Robinson–Duncan playbook. “It’s been tried there before,” says Hawks coach Mike Budenholzer, a Spurs assistant from 1996 to 2013. “It’s hard. David was a special player.” Instead the Spurs will continue to develop Aldridge’s three-point shooting—he connected on a career-high 35.2% of his threes last season—while allowing the offense to develop organically. “With guys as talented as Duncan and Aldridge, it’s better to sit back and watch them play a little bit and see what their comfort levels are,” says Popovich. “With LaMarcus, the things you saw him do in Portland, he will continue to do. We’ll just try to mesh him into the way we do things and make him a hybrid.”

T’S MID-SEPTEMBER, and Aldridge is settling into a chair in a lounge on the ground floor of the Montage hotel in Beverly Hills. He’s relaxed, far more so than he was a few months earlier when the weight of his decision was often overwhelming. “It was not fun,” says



PROMISE LAND

Popovich (above, left) and Udoka (in blue) assured Aldridge that he would be able to get his numbers in San Antonio.



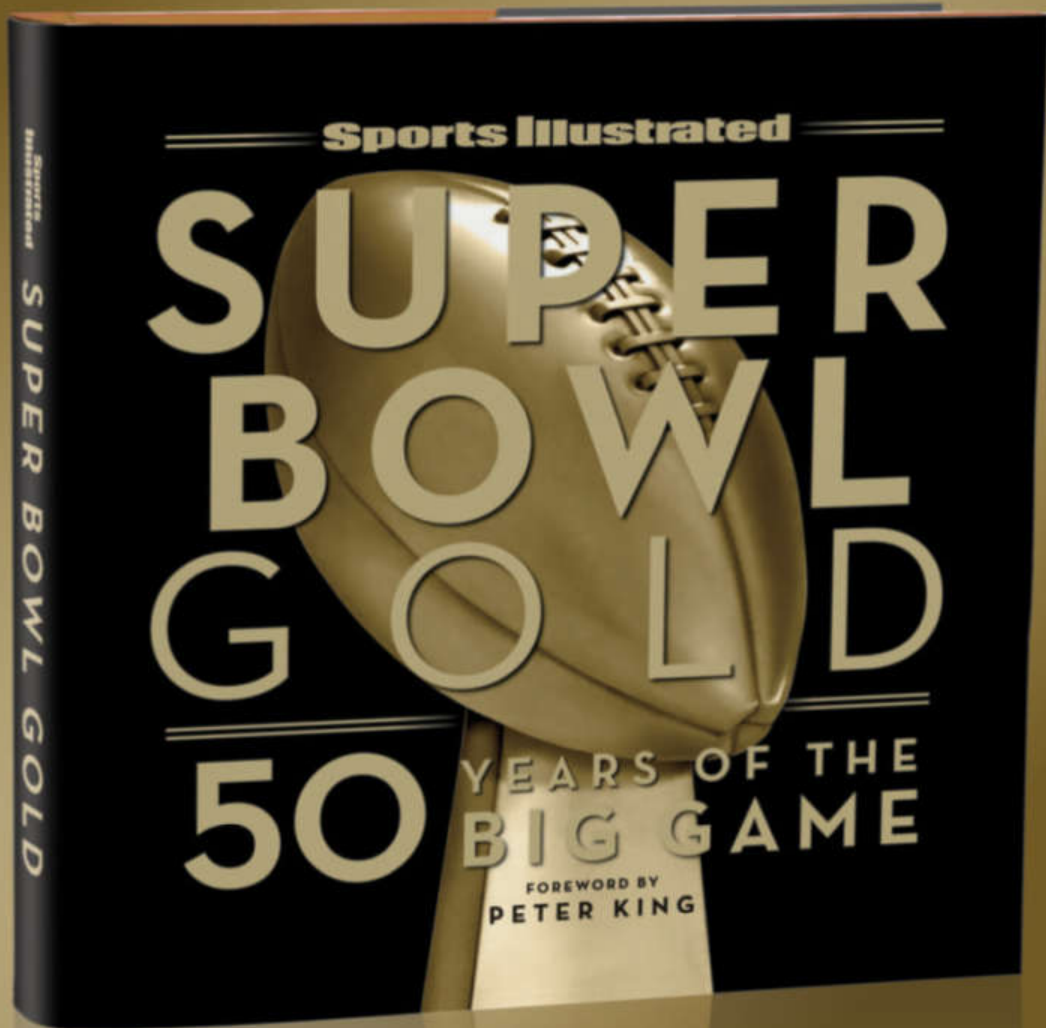
Aldridge. “It was really stressful. It’s not something I want to do again.” Nevertheless, questions about his choice to leave Portland still linger. Why, after declaring his loyalty to the Trail Blazers in 2014, did he defect? Why, after forgoing thumb surgery last January, a decision interpreted by many as a sign of Aldridge’s commitment to the Blazers, did he leave town six months later? Was it because of point guard Damian Lillard? The two teammates had never been chummy. Was it the organization? In nine years with the Blazers, Aldridge had never escaped the second round of the playoffs. Was it Texas? Aldridge’s mother, Georgia, a breast cancer survivor, lives in Dallas. His sons, Jaylen and LaMarcus Jr., also live in Texas.

The answer: all of the above. Aldridge admits that his relationship with Lillard could have been better. “The issue you have with two competitive guys being brought up the same way is that you don’t have one person who goes out of his way to make a relationship,” says Aldridge. Portland’s postseason woes were also a factor. In the end, Aldridge says there was no negativity, no ill will, no bleep-you moment that had him running for the door. He just decided that both sides would benefit from a fresh start. “They did everything they could,” says Aldridge.

The Spurs won’t overwhelm Aldridge with expectations. He’s not a savior, and the Spurs don’t need him to be one. San Antonio will ask Aldridge to be Aldridge. Score. Rebound. Defend the rim . . . with an added twist. After a recent practice, Aldridge stayed on the floor to shoot threes from several spots. Just another Spur channeling Pop, doing what’s needed to win. □

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5 MINUTE GUIDE

OUR ANNUAL RANKING OF
TEAMS BY MOST *OOOHS*
AND *AAHHS* (AND BOOS AND
BLAHS), THE KEY DATES
TO CIRCLE AND WHO WILL
WIN THE HARDWARE



GAMES TO WATCH

Mark these dates in
your calendar now

Nov. 11

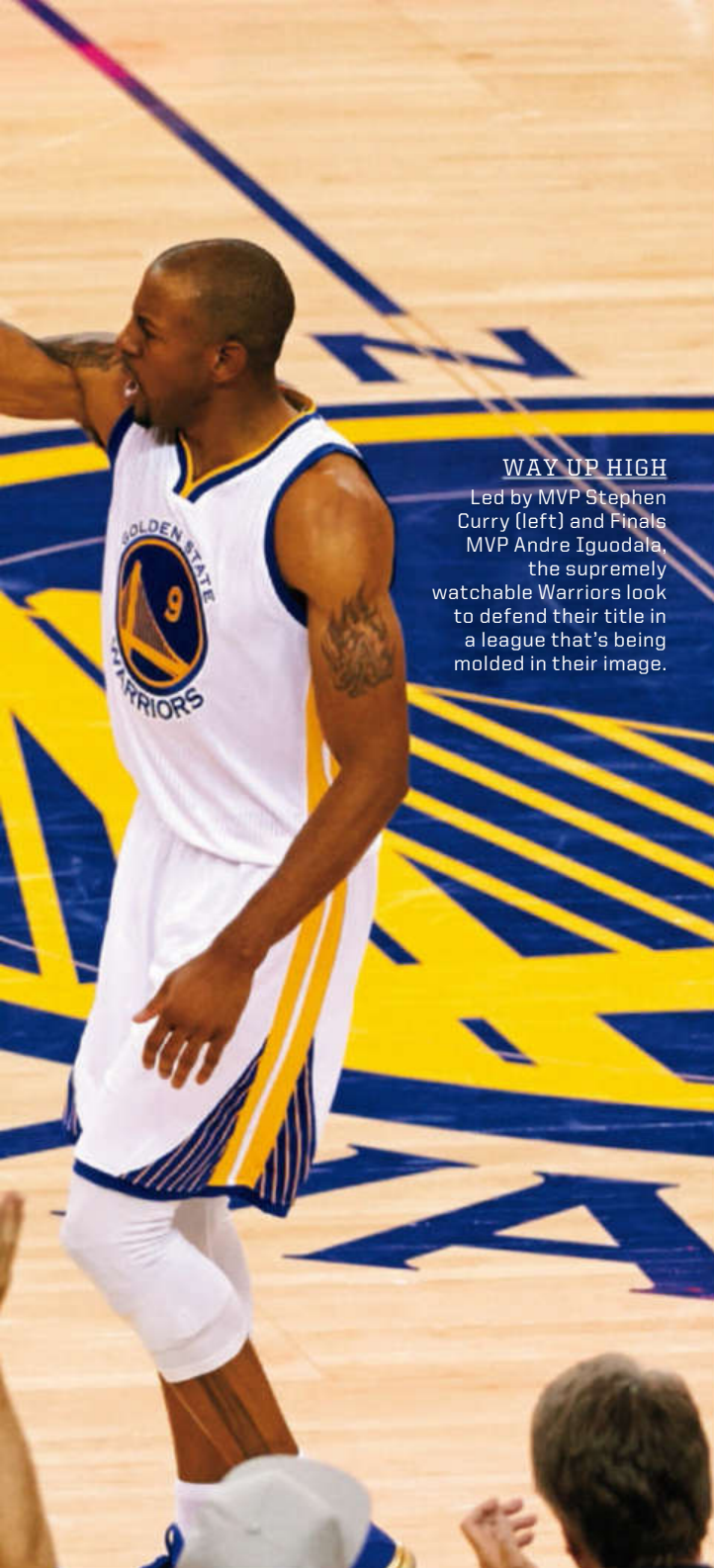
Calling all haters! **DeAndre Jordan** and the Clippers visit Dallas, followed by LaMarcus Aldridge's return to Portland.



Dec. 25

Santa brings five games, starting with **Chris Bosh** and the Heat against the Pelicans and ending with a battle for L.A.





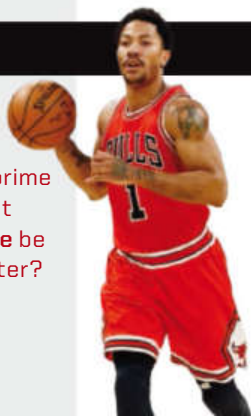
WAY UP HIGH

Led by MVP Stephen Curry (left) and Finals MVP Andre Iguodala, the supremely watchable Warriors look to defend their title in a league that's being molded in their image.

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WARRIORS); JOHN W. MCNOLLOUGH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (JORDAN, ROSE); ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (ROSH)

Jan. 23

The NBA returns to ABC prime time as the Cavaliers host Chicago. Will **Derrick Rose** be healthy? Will it even matter?



THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT!

Just how much fun will each team be to watch this season?



The Warriors' 2015 title run was a breakthrough for fans of beautiful basketball. Golden State proved that an offense built outside-in could withstand the rigors of the playoffs. The Warriors also showed that an undersized defense without a traditional center could force bigger opponents to adapt, and they demonstrated that an up-tempo team could be versatile and disciplined enough to defeat fast and slow opponents alike.

Now, here come the imitators. This season the NBA will feature smaller lineups and a faster style that emphasizes ball movement, spacing, three-point shooting and interchangeable positions. Even traditional, defensive-minded teams such as the Bulls and the Pacers devoted their summers to restyling their rosters.

Here's how the league shapes up in terms of entertainment value, from "Must-see TV" to "What's on Netflix?" Criteria include projected success, style of play, potency, age, health, coaching and star power.

—Ben Golliver

1 WARRIORS Golden State's freewheeling, explosive offense, built around MVP Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson, perfected the captivating blowout, in which the entertainment lies in spectacular dominance. The Warriors led the league with 45 double-digit victories last season.

2 THUNDER Kevin Durant was exquisite in 2013–14; Russell Westbrook was ferocious in '14–15. Oklahoma City can match Golden State's electricity if both MVP candidates stay healthy.

3 CLIPPERS Come for the scoring, stay for the dunks. Wild cards Josh Smith and Lance Stephenson will enhance the NBA's most efficient attack—or derail it.

4 CAVALIERS Early-season chemistry issues, midseason trades and postseason injuries

kept Cleveland from fulfilling its showtime potential in 2014–15. LeBron James, still the NBA's most spellbinding player, won't let that happen again.

5 ROCKETS Rarely does a team with two superstars such as James Harden and Dwight Howard also go two-deep at every position. New point guard Ty Lawson will supercharge these speed demons.

6 PELICANS The league's most intriguing talent (Anthony Davis) now has an offensive guru as his coach (Alvin Gentry). It's like starting a dessert recipe with chocolate *and* peanut butter.

7 SPURS While San Antonio's ceiling is sky high, Gregg Popovich will earn his paycheck managing LaMarcus Aldridge's assimilation, Kawhi Leonard's ascent and Tony Parker's decline.

8 BULLS Early injuries to Derrick Rose and Mike Dunleavy are familiar wet blankets, but relentless Jimmy Butler and outside shooting will help Chicago find a better flow.

9 JAZZ Don't be fooled by the weak point guards: Utah is the NBA's best-kept secret, thanks to a stingy defense and a loaded frontcourt (with Rudy Gobert, Gordon Hayward and Derrick Favors).

10 HAWKS Regression is normal after a 60-win season, but don't dismiss a team with four All-Stars and a heady five-man approach at both ends.

11 WIZARDS Will Coach Randy Wittman follow through on his pledge to improve shot selection and exploit John Wall's open-court ability?

12 CELTICS There's not a Bird or a Pierce on this roster, but Boston compensates with hardworking, coachable contributors and a young, fierce backcourt.

13 HEAT Miami's roster is among the league's five most entertaining. But Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh missed a combined 58 games in '15, and absences this season would curtail the team's firepower.

14 KINGS Leading a collection of big egos and brash personalities, the overpowering DeMarcus Cousins is one of the NBA's

most watchable stars. His legendary impatience only adds intrigue.

15 GRIZZLIES They've been dismantling opposing offenses for a half-decade. Despite a suffocating style and shooting struggles, their veteran core can be a joy to watch.

16 PACERS By dumping tall ball for small ball, Larry Bird transformed his team more than any other executive. Paul George's return will boost last year's 24th-ranked offense (97.3 ppg).

17 RAPTORS Behind point guard Kyle Lowry, Toronto occasionally thrills, but two straight postseason collapses make it hard to embrace these paper tigers.

18 BUCKS Built for the Vine generation, Milwaukee plays 48 minutes of lockdown defense and subpar offense, with occasional eye-popping dunks.

19 TRAIL BLAZERS The off-season seriously diminished Portland's talent, but the rebuilding Blazers will focus on friskiness: Damian Lillard will be unleashed, and eager young bigs will chip in.

20 LAKERS Tune in for the nostalgia of Kobe Bryant's turnaround jumpers and the promise of D'Angelo Russell and Julius Randle. Try to forget about the muddled present.

21 TIMBERWOLVES They may top this list in, say, 2020, but for now No. 1 picks Andrew Wiggins and Karl-Anthony Towns will sparkle amid the team's growing pains.

22 SUNS Even if Eric Bledsoe has an All-Star season and Markieff Morris survives without his twin, Marcus, Phoenix will struggle in the West. Blame the front office for shipping out too much talent.

23 MAGIC They can field a starting five composed of top 20 picks from the last four drafts, but the youngsters haven't yet scored consistently or stopped anybody.

24 KNICKS The good news: Phil Jackson signed actual NBA players, and No. 4 pick Kristaps Porzingis is no mere curiosity. But Carmelo Anthony's supporting cast still isn't deep enough.

25 NUGGETS Rookie point guard Emmanuel Mudiay is flashy and powerful, but Denver still lacks a team identity.

26 MAVERICKS The reversal of free agent DeAndre Jordan forced the Mavs to surround aging Dirk Nowitzki with castoffs and injury-prone players.

27 PISTONS Stan Van Gundy's spread offense is taking shape around Andre Drummond and Reggie Jackson, but the defense is still a disaster.

28 HORNETS The team lost forward Michael Kidd-Gilchrist to a shoulder injury. Nicolas Batum has been asked to spark a feeble offense, but don't get your hopes up.

29 76ERS Jahlil Okafor's Blue Devils won 35 games last season, but will his Sixers be able to match that before 2017? Center Joel Embiid is out with a foot injury.

30 NETS The boom days of the team's move to Brooklyn have gone bust. At least Deron Williams isn't their problem anymore. □



JAZZ
RUDY
GOBERT

CHRIS MANNIX'S AWARD PICKS



SIXTH MAN ISAIAH THOMAS

The 5' 9" playmaker averaged 19.0 points in 26.0 minutes off Boston's bench.



COACH ALVIN GENTRY

His quick-paced offense will help turn the Pelicans into contenders.



DEFENSIVE POY KAWHI LEONARD

The Spurs' forward is the perennial favorite until further notice.



ROOKIE JAHIL OKAFOR

The Duke big man will put up huge numbers on another terrible 76ers team.



MOST IMPROVED DONATAS MOTIEJUNAS

He'll thrive alongside Dwight Howard in the Rockets' frontcourt.



MV-PELICAN

In his new coach's quick-paced offense, Davis will only improve on his fourth-ranked scoring average of 24.4 points.

TIME TO BROW DOWN

Under a new offensive system, Anthony Davis will be crowned the league's next MVP



"If you take all the factors in-age and everything like that—you could really make a case for [Anthony Davis as] the best player in the league," the Pelicans' new coach, Alvin Gentry, said in July, thus launching the first strike in what is likely to be an MVP campaign for the 22-year-old power forward. A marvelously effective scorer—too explosive to stop after making a catch on the roll, too quick for bigs to guard face-up, too strong to be pushed out of his comfort zones—the 6' 11", 253-pound Davis also cuts a daunting defensive figure. His coverage is equal parts Draymond Green (versatility, quickness) and Rudy Gobert (length, shot blocking), making him the ideal centerpiece for a modern D. Awestruck coaches and executives around the league, shaking their heads, consider Davis's brilliant future with an air of inevitability. His ascent to the top, they agree, is only a matter of time.

There is good reason to believe that time is now. Davis has already shown preternatural restraint during his first three seasons; he wouldn't even pause to consider taking any of the ill-informed shots that his peers hoist on a whim. Instead he


has waited for quality opportunities, as reflected by his 53.5% shooting last season, the highest among the league's top 50 scorers. His turnovers (1.4 per game in 2014-15) are even rarer than his forces.

Now he will combine that shrewd judgment with increased scoring chances. Gentry's up-tempo, spacing-driven system will yield more catches in rhythm and a clearer lane for dribble penetration. And there's this: Gentry wants his players to take advantage of the first good look, no matter how early in the possession. That creates more reasons than ever to fear the Brow.

Davis's range extends beyond the three-point arc, where his effortless stroke floats jumpers softly home. The Pelicans' staff is working on his fundamentals—footwork and body positioning, especially down low—to give him even more avenues to explore. Informed by three years facing top scorers, his array of defensive tools should be put to their best use yet.

In spite of injuries that devastated New Orleans last year, Davis joined the NBA's royalty: His player efficiency rating of 30.89 led the league. By the end of this season, at age 23, Davis will be the best player in the world and a worthy MVP.

—Rob Mahoney

A high-angle, low-key photograph of a basketball game. In the foreground, LeBron James, wearing a Cleveland Cavaliers maroon and gold jersey, is shown from the waist up, holding a basketball with both hands and looking directly at the camera with a determined expression. He is wearing yellow sneakers. In the background, a player from the Oklahoma City Thunder, wearing a white jersey with blue and red trim, is visible, looking towards the camera. The court floor is a light blue color with black boundary lines. The lighting is dramatic, casting long shadows on the court. The text "SCOUTING" and "NBA PREVIEW" are overlaid on the image.

SCOUTING

NBA
PREVIEW

REP



SPORTS

GET READY, CLEVELAND

After the Drive and the Catch, the Fumble and the Decision, 51 years of sports futility on the shores of Lake Erie will come to an end next June. Yes, the four heavyweights in the Western Conference will beg to differ. But by the time Oklahoma City, Golden State, the L.A. Clippers and San Antonio finish throwing haymakers at one another, a rested, relaxed and ridiculously talented Cavaliers team will be waiting to finish off OKC in the Finals. There is no stopping Cleveland now. —Chris Mannix

EASTERN STANDINGS

- 1 CAVALIERS
- 2 RAPTORS
- 3 BULLS
- 4 HAWKS
- 5 BUCKS
- 6 WIZARDS
- 7 HEAT
- 8 CELTICS
- 9 PACERS
- 10 NETS
- 11 HORNETS
- 12 PISTONS
- 13 KNICKS
- 14 MAGIC
- 15 76ERS

Conference Finals

**CAVALIERS
OVER BULLS**

WESTERN STANDINGS

- 1 THUNDER
- 2 WARRIORS
- 3 CLIPPERS
- 4 ROCKETS
- 5 SPURS
- 6 GRIZZLIES
- 7 PELICANS
- 8 SUNS
- 9 MAVERICKS
- 10 JAZZ
- 11 KINGS
- 12 TIMBERWOLVES
- 13 NUGGETS
- 14 LAKERS
- 15 TRAIL BLAZERS

Conference Finals

**THUNDER
OVER WARRIORS**

NBA FINALS

**CAVALIERS
OVER THUNDER**

FINAL PIECE

Kyrie Irving missed all but the first game of the 2015 Finals. With him on the floor for the entire series next spring, the Cavs will enjoy a happier result.

Photograph by
Greg Nelson
For Sports Illustrated

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH DAVID BLATT

(2nd season with Cavaliers)

2014-15 RECORD 53-29

(1st in Central)

PG KYRIE IRVING

21.7 PPG; 5.2 APG; 46.8 FG%; 41.5 3FG%

SG J.R. SMITH

12.7 PPG; 2.5 APG; 42.5 FG%; 39.0 3FG%

SF LEBRON JAMES

25.3 PPG; 6.0 RPG; 7.4 APG; 48.8 FG%

PF KEVIN LOVE

16.4 PPG; 9.7 RPG; 43.4 FG%; 36.7 3FG%

C TIMOFEY MOZGOV

9.7 PPG; 7.3 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 55.5 FG%

BENCH

SG IMAN SHUMPERT

7.2 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 41.0 FG%; 33.8 3FG%

PG MO WILLIAMS*

14.2 PPG; 6.2 APG; 39.7 FG%; 34.2 3FG%

C ANDERSON VAREJÃO

9.8 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 0.6 BPG; 55.5 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

CLEVELAND Cavaliers

MODEST PROPOSAL

MAKE THE MOST OF MO

EAST
1

Even as he was piling up 40-point games against the Warriors in the Finals, LeBron James still had 11 more assists than all of his teammates combined, a reflection of Cleveland's obvious playmaking deficiencies once Kyrie Irving went down with a left knee injury. General manager David Griffin's hands were mostly tied by the need to retain so many of his free agents this summer, but he was able to add a little dynamism by signing 6' 1" guard Mo Williams to a two-year, \$4.3 million deal.

The 32-year-old has played for five teams in the last four seasons, but he's an ideal fit in Cleveland, where he made his only All-Star appearance, riding shotgun to James in 2009. Williams's score-first mentality and quickness off the dribble should help the Cavaliers avoid the stand-and-watch-LeBron approach that did them in against Golden State, and his career 37.9% three-point stroke makes him another catch-and-shoot target for James's crosscourt lasers. Although Williams isn't a pure point guard, that's not really an issue: He can play off the ball when he's sharing the stage with the stars, then take over offense-initiation duties with the second unit.

A narrow role should suit Williams just fine, as he's capable of creating some easy looks for James, keeping defenses honest with his outside shot and providing a jump start when the offense is lagging. (See his career-high 52-point outburst with the T-Wolves last season.) When he returns around January, Irving will be James's primary sidekick, but Williams is a worthy addition to the posse.

—Ben Golliver

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Cleveland

They had one real series in the East last year, and I don't see it being much harder this year. Who else in the conference got substantially better? No one. . . . **David Blatt** is a very, very sound coach with sound philosophies. It's just like in the NFL: **LeBron James** is his quarterback, and LeBron will get the credit if they win and Blatt will get the blame if they lose. . . . LeBron is still easily the best player in the league. He hasn't "slipped" yet physically, but he's making a point to pick his spots a lot better. He knows that he doesn't need to take over every game in December or January. . . . The questions I have about **Kyrie Irving** are all defensive. You can always attack him. Part of your offensive game plan should be to involve him in as many pick-and-rolls as possible. He should watch how Mike Conley slides through picks and sticks to game plans about when to go over and when to go under. . . . The major thing to keep an eye on: They struggled to share the ball when their three stars were healthy. You saw the chemistry improve with **Tristan Thompson** because he doesn't need the ball like **Kevin Love**. Blatt needs to help Love—give him a bigger package of post plays, give him some isolation touches, maybe stagger his minutes so he's the go-to guy for the second unit. . . . **Timofey Mozgov** is going to get paid next summer. He made the transition so quickly after the trade. He became their defensive identity. . . . When teams like the Warriors go small against them, they need to find better smaller lineups. If there's a rematch in the Finals, they should play LeBron at the five, have him take on Draymond [Green] and then flood the court with four little guys who can shoot.

TELLING NUMBER

100

NBA rank in usage percentage for **Kevin Love** last season (21.6%), which placed him just behind Roy Hibbert. In 2013-14, his final season with the Timberwolves, Love had a usage number of 28.4%, 11th highest in the league.



NOT FADING AWAY

James turned 30 last year, but he showed no signs of slowing—especially in the Finals, where he averaged 35.8 points and 13.3 rebounds a game.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH DWANE CASEY

(5th season with Raptors)

2014-15 RECORD 49-33

(1st in Atlantic)

PG KYLE LOWRY

17.8 PPG; 6.8 APG; 41.2 FG%; 33.8 3FG%

SG DEMAR DEROZAN

20.1 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 3.5 APG; 41.3 FG%

SF DEMARRE CARROLL*

12.6 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 48.7 FG%; 39.5 3FG%

PF PATRICK PATTERSON

8.0 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 44.9 FG%; 37.1 3FG%

C JONAS VALANCIUNAS

12.0 PPG; 8.7 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 57.2 FG%

BENCH

SG TERENCE ROSS

9.8 PPG; 2.8 RPG; 41.0 FG%; 37.2 3FG%

PG CORY JOSEPH*

6.8 PPG; 2.4 APG; 2.4 RPG; 50.4 FG%

PF LUIS SCOLA

9.4 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 1.3 APG; 46.7 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

TORONTO Raptors

MODEST PROPOSAL

GO BACK TO GUARDING PEOPLE

EAST
2

A funny thing happened to the Raptors last season: They stopped playing defense. The stingy unit from 2013-14 suddenly sprang leaks, dropping into the bottom six of the NBA in defensive efficiency (107.7) and opponent's field goal percentage (45.9%), while struggling to stop dribble penetration and guard the three-point line.

Enter 6' 8" DeMarre Carroll, a bona fide wing stopper who inked a free-agent deal last summer. Carroll, 29, gives coach Dwane Casey a chance to neutralize elite small forwards while taking needed pressure off All-Star guard DeMar DeRozan. To preserve DeRozan, who battled injuries last season, Carroll has to take on the opponents' top wing options, a role he thrived in last season with Atlanta.

A rejuvenated D would be welcome, because the Raptors can be prolific offensively. DeRozan had his second straight 20-point-per-game season. Point guard Kyle Lowry—who came to camp noticeably slimmer—was an All-Star. The loss of supersub Lou Williams hurts, but the arrival of Carroll moves Terrence Ross into Williams's spot and should improve the ball movement; Toronto was 24th in passes made last season, according to SportVU data. If Casey can squeeze more post production out of center Jonas Valanciunas (a perennial problem), Toronto could have its most balanced attack in years.

In addition to Carroll, the Raptors added shot-blocker Bismack Biyombo and pesky backup guard Cory Joseph. With a better D they should run away with the Atlantic Division—and maybe more.

—C.M.



TELLING NUMBER

82

Offensive rating by **Kyle Lowry** in the playoffs—a 25% decline from the regular season. He shot 31.6% in a first-round loss to the Wizards.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Toronto

On paper they're head and shoulders above the rest of the division—but that division is the worst in the league.... With Amir Johnson gone they'll use **Patrick Patterson** as a stretch four.... By signing **DeMarre Carroll** [four years, \$60 million] they're looking to get more athletic. They basically have been a half-court team, grinding it out, playing inside-out. Now they want to play that small four, run it up and down, space the floor, use fewer sets and attack the rim.... **DeMar DeRozan** is an All-Star, no doubt about it, but he didn't play like one last year with the [groin] injury. It's his contract year and he's in the big-money range, so I assume he'll come back in great shape.... After the All-Star break they fell apart. **Kyle Lowry** had been their best player; after the break and in the playoffs he was just terrible. They needed to address that position, and I think they might have by bringing in **Cory Joseph**.... **Jonas Valanciunas** needs to take another step. He's been very average since he came into the league. He's a big body, he takes up space, he can lean in and defend big guys. But they throw the ball in to him and he's not making shots. I don't think they addressed that with **Bismack Biyombo**, who is—I don't want to say awful, but he's got the worst hands in the league.... **Luis Scola** has a little bit left in his tank [at 35]. He's a great role model, and he'll bring a lot of credibility to that locker room. He leads by example. I think that was a pretty good pickup as a backup four. But then again: Luis is not a good defender.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH FRED HOIBERG

(1st season with Bulls)

2014-15 RECORD 50-32

(2nd in Central)

PG DERRICK ROSE

17.7 PPG; 4.9 APG; 40.5 FG%; 28.0 3FG%

SG JIMMY BUTLER

20.0 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 3.3 APG; 46.2 FG%

SF MIKE DUNLEAVY

9.4 PPG; 3.9 RPG; 43.5 FG%; 40.7 3FG%

PF PAU GASOL

18.5 PPG; 11.8 RPG; 1.9 BPG; 49.4 FG%

C JOAKIM NOAH

7.2 PPG; 9.6 RPG; 4.7 APG; 44.5 FG%

BENCH

SG KIRK HINRICH

5.7 PPG; 2.2 APG; 37.3 FG%; 34.5 3FG%

PF TAJ GIBSON

10.3 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 50.2 FG%

PF NIKOLA MIROTTIC

10.2 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 40.5 FG%; 31.6 3FG%

CHICAGO
Bulls

MODEST PROPOSAL

GIVE THE ROOKIE COACH SOME TIME

EAST
3

Steve Kerr did his coaching colleagues no favors by winning an NBA title as a rookie with the Warriors. As if adjusting to a new job, a new environment and a new roster wasn't enough, Kerr had to then go and evaporate the grace period usually afforded to newbies. Bulls coach Fred Hoiberg, in particular, will bear the brunt of Kerr-driven comparisons, especially given their other similarities: former sharpshooting guards who starred in Chicago and have front-office experience. Like Kerr, Hoiberg favors a modern "pace and space" approach to offense. Like Kerr, Hoiberg takes over for a successful, stubborn and polarizing coach (Tom Thibodeau) and is tasked with lifting a 50-win team to greatness.

The parallels end, however, once the two teams' rosters are laid side-by-side. Chicago lacks an MVP-caliber centerpiece, and it's difficult to build a space-oriented attack around the nonsplashy three-point shooting of Derrick Rose. Many of the Bulls' key pieces, including big men Pau Gasol and Joakim Noah, will likely struggle to adapt to an up-tempo approach. And, perhaps most important, Chicago's wings aren't loaded with proven marksmen, especially after Mike Dunleavy underwent back surgery in September and won't return until late November at the earliest.

Hoiberg's successful turnaround at Iowa State depended largely on his welcoming transfers, and Chicago's roster might need a similar overhaul. Given the pieces he has inherited, and Rose's ongoing health questions, the Mayor shouldn't be judged too harshly on early returns. —B.G.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Chicago

I think **Fred Hoiberg** is going to try to jump-start their offense by separating the two big men [**Pau Gasol** and **Joakim Noah**] and going smaller. The big question: Will that affect their elite defense? ... The other obvious question is whether **Derrick Rose** can stay healthy. Hoiberg needs to explore early whether Rose and **Jimmy Butler** can coexist and whether Gasol and Noah can coexist or whether he needs to spread out their minutes. They've usually found their best fit when someone is injured. Hurt feelings could sink this team if Hoiberg is not careful. ... Rose is trying to find out how to be effective without taking a pounding going to the basket. He's looking for his jump shot more, but he's a shotmaker, not a shooter. Defenses should give him the jumpers all day. ... Butler is one of the best two-way players in the league. He turned himself into a playmaker, a top threat on offense. I don't see Chicago being Butler's team as long as Rose is there. That could create some drama for sure. ... Gasol was unbelievable at EuroBasket. He was easily the best player on the floor. But I don't think he can start at center on a championship team from a defensive standpoint. Good teams will just go right at him. ... It was strange to see how far Noah fell last season. In the past, when Rose was out, they ran the offense through Noah at the elbow. Last year he gave them nothing—less than nothing, because he killed the spacing. ... Hoiberg might have **Nikola Mirotic** and **Taj Gibson** coming off the bench. Are you kidding me? They have four bigs who could be legitimate starters on almost any team.

TELLING NUMBER

11

NBA rank in defensive rating last year for the Bulls, who conceded 104.3 points per 100 possessions—despite the presence of All-Defensive second-team guard **Jimmy Butler**. In the previous four seasons Chicago was tied for first, second twice and sixth.



PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH MIKE BUDENHOLZER

(3rd season with Hawks)

2014-15 RECORD 60-22

(1st in Southeast)

PG JEFF TEAGUE

15.9 PPG; 7.0 APG; 46.0 FG%; 34.3 3FG%

SG KYLE KORVER

12.1 PPG; 4.1 RPG; 48.7 FG%; 49.2 3FG%

SF THABO SEFOLOSHA

5.3 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 41.8 FG%; 32.1 3FG%

PF PAUL MILLSAP

16.7 PPG; 7.8 RPG; 47.6 FG%; 35.6 3FG%

C AL HORFORD

15.2 PPG; 7.2 RPG; 1.3 BPG; 53.8 FG%

BENCH

SF KENT BAZEMORE

5.2 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 42.6 FG%; 36.4 3FG%

C TIAGO SPLITTER*

8.2 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 1.5 APG; 55.8 FG%

PG DENNIS SCHRODER

10.0 PPG; 4.1 APG; 42.7 FG%; 35.1 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

ATLANTA Hawks

MODEST PROPOSAL

GO BIG AND GET PHYSICAL



TELLING NUMBER

33, 11

Age in years and months of **Kyle Korver** at last year's All-Star Game. He became the fourth-oldest first-timer (behind Sweetwater Clifton, Sam Cassell and Anthony Mason).

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Atlanta

I see them dropping a little bit. They had a great year but, to me, everything fell into place. [And] the league has improved, the East in particular. ... I like their roster, but I love **Mike Budenholzer**. There are a lot of teams that want to play like the Hawks but can't. Nobody spaces the floor better. They have a really good freelancing, spacing-type offense, but most of their scoring came from good penetration, drive-and-kick, and guys moving to the right spots. ... **Jeff Teague** draws the defense and is really good at finding shooters. That was their offense. They were the most unselfish team in the league. That's a credit to Bud. ... **Kent Bazemore** has the most upside on this team. His best asset is his defense, and with his shooting improving, he's more of a threat from three. Bazemore really can run the floor. With how they like to push the pace, he fits right in. ... Whenever **Dennis Schroder** came into the game, he seemed to dominate the ball. **Kyle Korver**, in particular, was struggling playing with Schroder. ... They don't have that inside game, so when their jump shots aren't going down, they're going to lose. That's what happened in the playoffs. Korver just might be the best three-point shooter in the league, but he didn't shoot it very well and their offense suffered. ... **Tiago Splitter** is a good high-post passer and a good screener who can roll. He's just not a good finisher. ... They probably look at **Tim Hardaway Jr.** as another shooter they can throw into the mix. He hasn't proven himself, but he's still young, and maybe a new start in Atlanta will help him.

EAST
4

Atlanta won 60 games and advanced to the conference finals last season despite one of the NBA's smallest frontcourts, with 6' 10" Al Horford at center and 6' 8" Paul Millsap at power forward. The Hawks were routinely outrebounded during the regular season (28th in the NBA) and then bullied on the boards in a four-game sweep by Cleveland. Enter Tiago Splitter, a physical, 6' 11", 245-pound center acquired from the Spurs, who will allow them to play big for the first time in Horford's eight years in Atlanta.

In San Antonio, Splitter supported Tim Duncan. He regularly took on the toughest defensive assignment up front and was a reliable rim protector. Despite battling a variety of injuries last season, Splitter made the Spurs better defensively: They gave up 100.4 points per 100 possessions with him on the floor and 102.9 with him off it. Expect the same in Atlanta, where the 30-year-old Splitter's presence will save Horford the wear and tear of having to play in the pivot every night.

Splitter will come off the bench—but not always to replace a big. With the departure of small forward DeMarre Carroll to Toronto, expect coach Mike Budenholzer (a former Spurs assistant) to experiment with Splitter-Horford-Millsap lineups, especially against teams that aren't too athletic on the wings. Filling the hole left by Carroll will be a challenge, but with the addition of Splitter, Atlanta can reinvent itself, for stretches at least, as a punishing interior team. —C.M.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH JASON KIDD

(2nd season with Bucks)

2014-15 RECORD 41-41

(3rd in Central)

PG MICHAEL CARTER-WILLIAMS

14.6 PPG; 6.7 APG; 39.6 FG%; 23.5 3FG%

SG KHRIS MIDDLETON

13.4 PPG; 4.4 RPG; 46.7 FG%; 40.7 3FG%

SF GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO

12.7 PPG; 6.7 RPG; 1.0 BPG; 49.1 FG%

PF JABARI PARKER

12.3 PPG; 5.5 RPG; 1.2 SPG; 49.0 FG%

C GREG MONROE*

15.9 PPG; 10.2 RPG; 2.1 APG; 49.6 FG%

BENCH

PG GREIVIS VASQUEZ*

9.5 PPG; 3.7 APG; 40.8 FG%; 37.9 3FG%

SG O.J. MAYO

11.4 PPG; 2.8 APG; 42.2 FG%; 35.7 3FG%

PF JOHN HENSON

7.0 PPG; 4.7 RPG; 2.0 BPG; 56.6 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

MILWAUKEE
Bucks

MODEST PROPOSAL PRIORITIZE DEPENDABILITY

EAST
5

How did the Bucks respond when their four-year, \$44 million investment in shot-blocking specialist Larry Sanders ended poorly? By making a four-year, \$44 million investment in shot-blocking specialist John Henson.

Milwaukee's expensive do-over is a reminder that reliability often trumps ferocity. Sanders was one of the league's most intimidating interior defenders, but he had trouble staying on the court. The Bucks bought him out less than one year into his deal after multiple drug suspensions and a battle with depression.

While Sanders was caught on a surveillance camera throwing liquor bottles during a nightclub brawl, Henson, 24, can be found on video on the team's website flinging fishing lines into Lake Michigan with schoolchildren. He spent his first three NBA seasons growing into his 6' 11" frame, and his baby face sports a wide smile more often than a scowl. Behind that sunny disposition is an accomplished rim protector who blocked a league-best 5.3 shots per 48 minutes last season, helping Milwaukee's defense become the stingiest in the East. Nicknamed Hook for his signature post move, the 230-pound Henson sticks to what works on offense: A whopping 97% of his shot attempts come from inside 10 feet.

By paying off Sanders and ponying up for Henson, second-year owners Marc Lasry and Wes Edens demonstrated their commitment to improving a team that has languished for more than a decade. The message behind their move: Talent plus low-maintenance likability are our core values. —B.G.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Milwaukee

Jason Kidd does a great job. They're young and athletic, they figured out a plan, identified their top guys and built a culture. They still have question marks, but I think they'll progress and win a playoff series. . . . **Giannis Antetokounmpo** is ready to take the next step. There's so much to like: He puts his wingspan to good use on defense, he converts plays in transition and he's a great kid. His shooting isn't quite where you want it to be, but he gets away with it thanks to his activity level. He's like a young Scottie Pippen. . . . Their biggest question is **Michael Carter-Williams**. He creates no space on the floor, and he's not a high-energy player. Given his lack of shooting, it's hard to keep him on the court if he's not doing something else at an elite level, and I don't know what that would be. . . . I could absolutely see **Greivis Vasquez** beating out Carter-Williams. He can run a team and he's started before. It might be better if Kidd turns Carter-Williams loose on the second unit. . . . They basically chose to pay **Khris Middleton** instead of Brandon Knight, and I like that thinking a lot. Shooting is at a premium, the highest it has ever been in the league, so Middleton was a must; he's an elite three-and-D guy. He's right there with Danny Green. . . . It will take some time for **Jabari Parker** to find where he fits on the totem pole, with Giannis and **Greg Monroe**. None of those three are great shooters, so it's tough to keep them on the court together. Monroe will give them a post-up presence. But I'm in wait-and-see mode with him. Kidd likes to play up-tempo, and Monroe isn't an up-tempo guy.

TELLING NUMBER

2.0

Steals per game by **Michael Carter-Williams** after he was acquired from the 76ers last February, the most on the team. Under new coach Jason Kidd, the Bucks went from 28th in the league in steals to first, and from 30th in defensive rating to fourth.

WALL BALL

The Wiz point guard became the second player in franchise history to average at least 10 assists (joining Rod Strickland).



PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH **RANDY WITTMAN**

(5th season with Wizards)

2014-15 RECORD **46-36**

(2nd in Southeast)

PG **JOHN WALL**

17.6 PPG; 10.0 APG; 44.5 FG%; 30.0 3FG%

SG **BRADLEY BEAL**

15.3 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 42.7 FG%; 40.9% 3FG%

SF **OTTO PORTER**

6.0 PPG; 3.0 RPG; 45.0 FG%; 33.7 3FG%

PF **NENÊ**

11.0 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 1.8 APG; 51.1 FG%

C **MARCIN GORTAT**

12.2 PPG; 8.7 RPG; 1.3 BPG; 56.6 FG%

BENCH

PG **RAMON SESSIONS***

6.3 PPG; 2.8 APG; 37.4 FG%; 31.7 3FG%

PF **KRIS HUMPHRIES**

8.0 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 0.4 BPG; 47.3 FG%

SG **JARED DUDLEY***

7.2 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 46.8 FG%; 38.5 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

WASHINGTON Wizards

MODEST PROPOSAL HURRY UP

EAST
6

Washington operated one of the NBA's more maddening offenses last season. The Wizards took a lot of shots they didn't make (midrange jumpers) and not enough of the ones they did (threes): Despite finishing ninth in three-point percentage, they ranked just 27th in attempts. Now the off-season departure of 37-year-old Paul Pierce to the Clippers, coupled with the postseason surge of third-year forward Otto Porter, has created an opportunity for coach Randy Wittman to play smarter and faster. And, he hopes, more efficiently.

With John Wall and Bradley Beal, Wittman has one of the league's most athletic backcourts. Yet the pace was often deliberate; the Wizards were 18th in the NBA in possessions per game last season. And the presence of two paint-clogging bigs (Nenê and Marcin Gortat) limited the lanes for dribble penetration. In training camp Washington introduced a faster system with a greater emphasis on spacing. That will most likely mean higher usage for Porter, who averaged 10.0 points in the playoffs, and more situations where a smaller wing plays alongside Nenê or Gortat. A goal, says Wall, is to finish in the top five in possessions. Gortat, who thrived in an up-tempo style for 2½ seasons in Phoenix, has publicly embraced the change.

Evolving won't be without issues. A commitment to small ball will cut into the minutes of Nenê and Gortat, two known grumblers. But to improve offensively, Washington has to make pace a priority. —C.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Washington

Washington has the second-best backcourt in the NBA, behind Golden State's. **John Wall** is an All-Star, and **Bradley Beal** is a budding All-Star. Now, the thing about them is that one or the other was always injured. Whenever they were together, they won.... Beal just needs to stay healthy to take that next step; he's got everything else. When Beal is on the floor, he's your prototype catch-and-shoot two guard.... A really big asset they have is that if they need a bucket at the end of the game, they can put the ball in Wall's hands up top. Nobody can stay in front of him.... They have an adequate frontcourt. They've got bigs who can score. **Marcin Gortat** is a double-double guy. **Nenê** has had injury issues, but he's a big body who can guard bigs as well as Gortat can. Both of them can step out and shoot 17-footers, too, which gives the Wizards a little diversity other than playing inside.... The most important thing defensively is to be able to keep people on the perimeter in front of you. Washington has Wall, who's extremely quick, along with **Beal** and **Otto Porter**, who are quick in their own right. Then, when teams do get dribble penetration, the Wizards have two physical, big guys in the way.... Obviously the loss of Paul Pierce and his leadership and his ability to play well in the playoffs will hurt. But with their new wings [**Alan Anderson**, **Jared Dudley** and **Gary Neal**] I think they replaced Pierce's shooting. Dudley's a knockdown three-point shooter—not a very good athlete, but when he squares, he's deadly.... Porter really played well in the playoffs. If he keeps that up, they'll be tough.

TELLING NUMBER

23.4

Scoring average of **Bradley Beal** in his 10 postseason games—a 52.9% increase over his regular-season production.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH ERIK SPOELSTRA

(8th season with Heat)

2014-15 RECORD 37-45

(3rd in Southeast)

PG GORAN DRAGIC

16.3 PPG; 4.5 APG; 50.1 FG%; 34.7 3FG%

SG DWYANE WADE

21.5 PPG; 4.8 APG; 47.0 FG%; 28.4 3FG%

SF LUOL DENG

14.0 PPG; 5.2 RPG; 46.9 FG%; 35.5 3FG%

PF CHRIS BOSH

21.1 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 46.0 FG%; 37.5 3FG%

C HASSAN WHITESIDE

11.8 PPG; 10.0 RPG; 2.6 BPG; 62.8 FG%

BENCH

PG MARIO CHALMERS

10.2 PPG; 3.8 APG; 40.3 FG%; 29.4 3FG%

PF JOSH MCROBERTS

4.2 PPG; 2.6 RPG; 1.9 APG; 52.8 FG%

SF JUSTISE WINSLOW (R)

12.6 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 48.6 FG%; 41.8 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

MIAMI Heat

MODEST PROPOSAL

KEEP THE STARTERS FRESH

EAST
7

With three players who have All-Star appearances on their résumés (Dwyane Wade, Luol Deng and Chris Bosh) and two more (Hassan Whiteside, Goran Dragic) who are strong candidates to make the team this season, Miami has one of the NBA's strongest starting lineups. It's also one of its most fragile: Wade, 33, and Deng, 30, have battled injuries in recent years, while Bosh, 31, is returning after a life-threatening blood clot in his lung prematurely ended his 2014-15 season. To maintain his starters into April, coach Erik Spoelstra will need to lean heavily on his second unit—a group that is loaded with question marks.

The Heat giddily pounced on Justise Winslow when the 6' 7" Duke forward slipped to No. 10 in the draft in June. An NBA-ready defender, Winslow worked with Wade on expanding his offensive game in training camp, but he's just 19. Miami took a flyer on free-agent swingman Gerald Green, hoping it gets the 2013-14 edition (15.8 points, 40.0% from three in Phoenix) instead of last year's model (11.9 and 35.4%). Forward Josh McRoberts can stretch the floor and knock down a three, but he missed 65 games last year with a right-knee injury. Mario Chalmers, now the backup to Dragic at the point, was known for his inconsistency during the Heat's two recent title runs.

No doubt the subs will struggle, and that may cost the team a spot or two in the standings. But Spoelstra will have to let them play through. The more time the starters can rest in the regular season, the better positioned Miami will be to go deep into the playoffs. —C.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Miami

In my mind they're the sleeper in the NBA—at least in the East. They're coming into the season with good coaching and an abundance of talent.... A big [question] is whether **Hassan Whiteside** can keep improving. Can he be consistent? The Heat are very big on fundamentals, very big on player development. I've got to think he's going to be better this year.... Backing him up is **Amar'e Stoudemire**. He played pretty well last year, and he'll be a good locker room guy. Then they've got **Chris Andersen**, who just creates havoc. That's three quality bigs.... **Chris Bosh** is an All-Star, though maybe a borderline one given his health issues, with **Josh McRoberts** behind him. McRoberts can shoot, he can rebound, and [at 6' 10"] he's got good size.... I've always been a big **Goran Dragic** fan. In my mind, he's an All-Star. Dragic and **Dwyane Wade**: That's a hell of a backcourt. The x-factor is whether Dwyane stays healthy.... They've got **Luol Deng** and **Justise Winslow** at small forward, but **Gerald Green**'s stepping into a bigger role. That's a little bit suspect. He'll either go 0 for 12 or 12 for 12.... Deng can contribute a lot when he has the right talent around him. He can't be the guy; he's more of a third or fourth player on a good team. He can make shots, he can take it to the rim, he can defend. I like him.... Winslow's got this thing about him—if you watch how he carries himself, you just see a player. As far as his talent, he can really take it to the rim. He's strong—he's got strong hands, a great body. He has all the tools except he's a little bit below average as a shooter. I think he'll get there.

TELLING NUMBER

26

Starts made for Miami by **Goran Dragic**—sixth most on the team, even though he arrived from Phoenix on Feb. 19. The Heat used 31 different starting lineups, the most in franchise history.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH BRAD STEVENS

(3rd season with Celtics)

2014-15 RECORD 40-42

(2nd in Atlantic)

PG MARCUS SMART

7.8 PPG; 3.1 APG; 1.5 SPG; 36.7 FG%

SG AVERY BRADLEY

13.9 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 42.8 FG%; 35.2 3FG%

SF JAE CROWDER

7.7 PPG; 3.6 RPG; 42.0 FG%; 29.3 3FG%

PF DAVID LEE*

7.9 PPG; 5.2 RPG; 0.5 BPG; 51.1 FG%

C KELLY OLYNYK

10.3 PPG; 4.7 RPG; 47.5 FG%; 34.9 3FG%

BENCH

PG ISAIAH THOMAS

16.4 PPG; 4.2 APG; 42.1 FG%; 37.3 3FG%

PF AMIR JOHNSON*

9.3 PPG; 6.1 RPG; 1.6 APG; 57.4 FG%

PF JARED SULLINGER

13.3 PPG; 7.6 RPG; 43.9 FG%; 28.3 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

BOSTON Celtics

MODEST PROPOSAL

FORCE-FEED THE YOUNG POINT GUARD

EAST
8

After an expert demolition of his aging team, general manager Danny Ainge has found that rebuilding it is more of a challenge. He spent the summer unsuccessfully dangling his cache of draft choices and promising young players in front of teams with a veteran centerpiece to offer.

The picks will always be valuable—especially the top-seven-protected acquired from the Mavericks for point guard Rajon Rondo—but Boston can speed up the reconstruction by making its young talent more enticing. Off-season pickups David Lee and Amir Johnson are proven commodities, but coach Brad Stevens must resist the temptation to rely on them if that takes court time away from big men Jared Sullinger, 23, and Kelly Olynyk, 24. Likewise, there should be extended minutes for 6' 6" sharpshooter James Young, 20, even if it means living with his defensive lapses.

Most important, 6' 4" point guard Marcus Smart needs an extended run. The No. 6 pick in 2014, Smart was uneven as a rookie—better than expected as a three-point shooter (33.5%) but disappointing at taking on players and getting to the foul line (1.9 attempts per game). During summer league the 21-year-old Smart showed signs of improved leadership and sharper skills (especially his dribble-drive). Despite the presence of superscorer Isaiah Thomas, the Celtics must make Smart the starter and let him grow on the job. If he develops, Ainge has another trade chip. Or something better: a franchise player.

—C.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Boston

They lack a star but have good depth, one through 11. They addressed their inside game; I'm not saying they brought in a stopper, but they added two decent-sized bodies in **David Lee** and **Amir Johnson**. Lee is still a good, seasoned forward, a double-double guy who can really rebound. **Jared Sullinger** and **Kelly Olynyk** just don't have a presence inside. They're step-out bigs, a little softer than the two guys they brought in.... They have a lot of good wings: **Avery Bradley**, **Evan Turner**, **Jae Crowder**, **James Young**, **R.J. Hunter**. I don't know if they'll go with **Marcus Smart** as the starter at point and bring **Isaiah Thomas** off the bench.

Thomas was really effective last year, but I'm not sure he'll be happy coming off the bench.... With all that depth, I think they can now play small and run, or they can play big. There's just no one guy other than Thomas who gives instant offense.... Olynyk is one of those guys I just haven't seen improve. He's a good player, a rotation guy, but he hasn't taken it to the next level. He could be out some minutes.... I love Bradley. He's not a star, but every year that kid gets better. Every year. He'll probably start at the two. It is somewhat of a smaller backcourt, but they played well together last year, Smart and Bradley.... I've been in the league a long time, and I've watched a lot of college coaches come in. Maybe 90% of them don't make it. **Brad Stevens** made the smoothest adjustment I've seen. In the last two or three minutes, they won more games than anybody in the league. I know there are coaches in this league that copy his ATOs [after timeout plays] and end-of-game plays.

TELLING NUMBER

19.0

Points per game for **Isaiah Thomas** after he was acquired from Phoenix last February—all off the bench. The highest scoring average for a Celtic with zero starts in a full season is just 10.7, by Kevin McHale in 1992-93.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH FRANK VOGEL

(6th season with Pacers)

2014-15 RECORD 38-44

(4th in Central)

PG GEORGE HILL

16.1 PPG; 5.1 APG; 47.7 FG%; 35.8 3FG%

SG MONTA ELLIS*

18.9 PPG; 4.1 APG; 44.5 FG%; 28.5 3FG%

SF C.J. MILES

13.5 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 39.8 FG%; 34.5 3FG%

PF PAUL GEORGE

8.8 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 36.7 FG%; 40.9 3FG%

C IAN MAHINMI

4.3 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 55.2 FG%

BENCH

SG RODNEY STUCKEY

12.6 PPG; 3.5 RPG; 3.1 APG; 44.0 FG%

SF CHASE BUDINGER*

6.8 PPG; 3.0 RPG; 43.3 FG%; 36.4 3FG%

PF JORDAN HILL*

12.0 PPG; 7.9 RPG; 1.5 APG; 45.9 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

INDIANA Pacers

MODEST PROPOSAL ENJOY THE RIDE

EAST
9

With lumbering giant Roy Hibbert jettisoned to the Lakers over the summer, the new-look Pacers are downright Lilliputian. Their six highest-paid players stand 6' 9" or shorter. And Hibbert's \$14.9 million salary last season was more than Indiana will pay its top four big men this year. No roster is perfectly balanced, but Indiana's is as off-kilter as it gets for a team with postseason aspirations.

What the Pacers lack in height and bulk they are hoping to make up for with athleticism, playmaking and shooting. To make this unorthodox approach work, coach Frank Vogel has no choice but to shift gears drastically. In his four full seasons as coach, Vogel's defense-first teams have never ranked higher than 19th in pace. Now he'll have to run whenever possible while cranking up the on-ball pressure to help compensate for Indiana's weak interior D. He'll also lean on Paul George and a backcourt of George Hill (who played the best ball of his career down the stretch last season after returning from a quad injury) and newcomer Monta Ellis (the leading scorer last season on the up-tempo Mavericks) to break down defenses and create opportunities in the open court.

The real pressure falls on George, who hasn't sounded enthusiastic during the preseason about the burden that comes with a shift from small to power forward. But his versatility and superstar skill level should enliven a rough-and-tumble brand of ball so bland it inspired the marketing slogan Blue Collar, Gold Swagger.

—B.G.



TELLING NUMBER

67

NBA rank in shots per game of the Pacers' team leader last year (George Hill, with 12.4). How will a healthy Paul George change things? In 2013-14, George averaged 17.0 attempts, 11th in the league.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Indiana

A winning record is the right goal for them. They lost Roy Hibbert and David West—those guys were their identity. Their roster screams that they will shift from a defense-first approach to an offense-first one, playing faster and smaller. . . . Frank Vogel is such a good coach that he will adapt. I don't think he's on the hot seat yet, but management didn't do him any favors. . . . I don't really see why they want to play Paul George more as a four; he's arguably the best three man in the league behind LeBron James and Kevin Durant. Why mess with that? . . . It's one thing to decide to move Hibbert, but then you come up with Jordan Hill? That's your back-up plan? . . . Ian Mahinmi is only a starting center if you have a legit All-Star at power forward. He's a guy you want on your team, a solid backup, resourceful. Defensively he's a presence, but offensively he's not ready to take that next step. . . . There is some firepower. Monta Ellis brings a nice scoring punch; he's one of the better paint-attackers in the league. He will be a big part of their next identity. Historically, that means they'll be pretty average. . . . If you have Monta, Paul and George Hill, you have guys who can all handle the ball and set up opportunities with the drive. They can get to the free throw line and get your defense in foul trouble, make you feel like you don't know where they will hit you from. . . . Both C.J. Miles and Chase Budinger should benefit from all of those guys in the drive-and-kick game. C.J. will be a key guy for them because of the need for spacing and a knockdown shooter.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH LIONEL HOLLINS

(2nd season with Nets)

2014-15 RECORD 38-44

(3rd in Atlantic)

PG JARRETT JACK

12.0 PPG; 4.7 APG; 43.9 FG%; 26.7 3FG%

SG BOJAN BOGDANOVIC

9.0 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 45.3 FG%; 35.5 3FG%

SF JOE JOHNSON

14.4 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 43.5 FG%; 35.9 3FG%

PF THADDEUS YOUNG

14.1 PPG; 5.4 RPG; 1.6 SPG; 46.6 FG%

C BROOK LOPEZ

17.2 PPG; 7.4 RPG; 1.8 BPG; 51.3 FG%

BENCH

PF ANDREA BARGNANI*

14.8 PPG; 4.4 RPG; 45.4 FG%; 36.6 3FG%

SG WAYNE ELLINGTON*

10.0 ppg; 3.2 RPG; 41.2 FG%; 37.0 3FG%

SF RONDAE HOLLIS-JEFFERSON (R)

11.2 PPG; 6.8 RPG; 1.2 SPG; 50.2 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

Nets

BROOKLYN

MODEST PROPOSAL BUILD ON BROOK

EAST
10

After five years of off-loading draft picks for veterans and burning through hundreds of millions of owner Mikhail Prokhorov's cash in free agency, the Nets are taking a more conventional, conservative approach. That means no more off-season spending sprees; Brooklyn's most notable addition over the summer was 7-foot Andrea Bargnani, who signed a two-year minimum deal. And that means no more Deron Williams; the All-Star point guard's rocky 4½ seasons with the Nets ended when they bought out the last two years of his contract. It also means it's time to build from within. And the way for coach Lionel Hollins to do that is to build around center Brook Lopez.

Lopez, 27, averaged a team-high 17.2 points in 2014-15 and, more important, had no recurrence of the foot injuries that sidelined him for most of two of the previous three seasons. Down the stretch Brooklyn went 13-6 to claim a playoff spot, with Lopez scoring 21.8 points per game and putting up seven double doubles. Hollins must continue to run the offense through Lopez, which means spacing the floor to give him room to operate. In addition to picking up a shooter in Bargnani, the Nets re-signed end-to-end power forward Thaddeus Young and flipped backup center Mason Plumlee to Portland for Rondae Hollis-Jefferson, the freakishly athletic 6' 7" rookie from Arizona.

Brooklyn is also breaking in a new starting backcourt: Jarrett Jack replaces Williams, and Bojan Bogdanovic is now the full-time shooting guard. Having a reliable scorer will be critical to easing their transitions. When healthy, Lopez is as reliable as they come.

—C.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Brooklyn

Of all the teams in the NBA, they have the longest road ahead of them. They're trying to change things, but they're basically plugging in average players. When you don't have assets and you don't have draft picks, what can you get? ... **Joe Johnson** has no value. Deron Williams had no value. Kevin Garnett, no value. Getting rid of Williams, who was kind of a disruptive factor, should help. But then if you look at their point guards, to me they're all backups. ... When Johnson's got the ball, there's no movement. He'll catch it on the wing, they'll clear out, and he'll just back guys down into an isolation turnaround. That's the only way he's ever played. I don't think they can improve by him playing like that. ...

Early in the year **Lionel Hollins** tried to put **Brook Lopez** on the post, throw it in and score inside. It just wasn't working. Once they moved to him facing the basket, working the elbow, [running] pick-and-pops they were a lot more effective. Lopez is as good a face-up shooter at his size as anybody—really deadly from 18 feet. They'll run a lot of stuff with him or **Andrea Bargnani** in the pick-and-pop. ... They were lucky to get **Thaddeus Young** halfway through the season last year. That put them over the top and into the playoffs. Young doesn't need to go through a play to score. He's good at catching off the elbow and creating for himself. With Lopez out there, Young has the ability to get to the rim. ... Hollins is one of the better coaches in the league. He makes players accountable, but I think he turned the corner with them last year when he backed off a little bit. He was a little too controlling, running plays every time.

TELLING NUMBER

5

NBA teams that paid luxury taxes last year, led by the Nets, who forked over nearly \$20 million. **Joe Johnson** has the most expensive deal: He earned \$23.2 million.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH STEVE CLIFFORD

(3rd season with Hornets)

2014-15 RECORD 33-49

(4th in Southeast)

PG KEMBA WALKER

17.3 PPG; 5.1 APG; 1.4 SPG; 38.5 FG%

SG P.J. HAIRSTON

5.6 PPG; 2.0 RPG; 32.3 FG%; 30.1 3FG%

SF NICOLAS BATUM*

9.4 PPG; 5.9 RPG; 40.0 FG%; 32.4 3FG%

PF MARVIN WILLIAMS

7.4 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 42.4 FG%; 35.8 3FG%

C AL JEFFERSON

16.6 PPG; 8.4 RPG; 1.3 BPG; 48.1 FG%

BENCH

PG JEREMY LAMB*

6.3 PPG; 2.3 RPG; 41.6 FG%; 34.2 3FG%

PF CODY ZELLER

7.6 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 46.1 FG%

F-C FRANK KAMINSKY (R)

18.8 PPG; 8.2 RPG; 54.7 FG%; 41.6 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

CHARLOTTE Hornets

MODEST PROPOSAL SPREAD THE WEALTH

EAST
11

It's easy to see the temptation: Al Jefferson is one of the NBA's most skilled post players, a reliable 16-to-18-points-per-game scorer. If you are coach Steve Clifford, why not force-feed him? Here's why: For the last two seasons Charlotte has finished in the bottom seven in offensive efficiency—including 28th last year. In that time Jefferson averaged 18.9 shots per 36 minutes, third in the NBA. Says Clifford, "We can't play where every play is to Al."

Heavily featured in Clifford's new sharing philosophy will be Nicolas Batum, the 26-year-old forward acquired from the Trail Blazers in the off-season. Batum is a skilled passer, averaging 4.8 assists last year. Clifford will look to use him in the same point forward role that Hedo Turkoglu filled for the Magic when Clifford was on Stan Van Gundy's staff. Batum became even more important when incumbent small forward Michael Kidd-Gilchrist suffered a right shoulder injury, which will sideline him for most of the year. Cody Zeller (who has been encouraged to shoot more threes) and rookie Frank Kaminsky (who doesn't need encouragement) will be expected to keep the floor spaced so Jefferson can work on the inside—at a more reasonable rate.

The Hornets' tumble from the playoffs to the lottery was among last season's most surprising stories. Their D is sturdy; it ranked in the top 10 in efficiency for the second straight year. A more balanced offense will put Charlotte back in the mix for a playoff spot.

—C.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Charlotte

The biggest x-factor is **Al Jefferson**. He gained a lot of weight toward the end of the season, and I feel like he's going to be injury-prone. They'll run a lot of turn-outs to get him the ball inside. The big question, then, is whether they put good enough shooters around him. . . . Last year they were near the bottom in almost every category on offense. You're going to see better spacing, better ball movement with **Nicolas Batum**. . . . **Jeremy Lamb** is a good addition too. He was knocking on the door in Oklahoma City, and this change may help him. . . . A point guard needs to be a distributor who can score as well; **Kemba Walker** is the opposite. He's their leader and a good one-on-one player when they need a bucket. But throughout the season, or even throughout 48 minutes, he pounds the ball too much and leaves his teammates standing around. . . . They'll play good defense. **Steve Clifford** really spends a lot of time on rotations. That fell apart last season because Lance Stephenson is terrible at that kind of stuff. . . . They want to go back to the way they played a couple of years ago, when Josh McRoberts was at the top of the key swinging the ball and making shots. That's probably why they drafted **Frank Kaminsky**. I saw him during the summer league and was really impressed with his shooting, his ballhandling and his intelligence on the court. . . . **Cody Zeller** needs to improve his scoring around the basket, but he runs the court really well and can knock down a 15-footer. That'll keep the spacing inside for Jefferson.

TELLING NUMBER

30.4

Three-point percentage for **Kemba Walker**, second worst in the NBA. Walker's 280 attempts led the Hornets, who were last in the league in three-point shooting (31.8%).

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH STAN VAN GUNDY

(2nd season with Pistons)

2014-15 RECORD 32-50

(5th in Central)

PG REGGIE JACKSON

14.5 PPG; 6.0 APG; 43.4 FG%; 29.9 3FG%

SG KENTAVIOUS CALDWELL-POPE

12.7 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 40.1 FG%; 34.5 3FG%

SF MARCUS MORRIS*

10.4 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 43.4 FG%; 35.8 3FG%

PF ERSAN ILYASOVA*

11.5 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 47.2 FG%; 38.9 3FG%

C ANDRE DRUMMOND

13.8 PPG; 13.5 RPG; 1.9 BPG; 51.4 FG%

BENCH

PG BRANDON JENNINGS

15.4 PPG; 6.6 APG; 40.1 FG%; 36.0 3FG%

SG JODIE MEEKS

11.1 PPG; 1.3 APG; 41.6 FG%; 34.9 3FG%

PF ANTHONY TOLLIVER

6.3 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 41.0 FG%; 36.6 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

DETROIT Pistons

MODEST PROPOSAL STAND BY STAN

EAST
12

Since taking over as coach and president in May 2014, Stan Van Gundy has revamped his roster so quickly that Detroit's longest-tenured player is now center Andre Drummond, who graduated from high school in '11. While Van Gundy's busy summer featured a few gambles, he has at least succeeded in providing the franchise with something new: direction.

Van Gundy's first step, of course, was dismantling the failed jumbo frontline. While he had to pay Josh Smith \$26 million to leave and got nothing for Greg Monroe, who signed with the Bucks, their exits set up Drummond, 22, as the unequivocal focal point on both ends of the floor.

Next, SVG found a point guard capable of running his spread pick-and-roll style. Although Reggie Jackson's track record is mediocre and he came at a high price, he does have the ability to create offense for himself and Drummond in the two-man game—a good start for a team that hasn't had an above-average attack since 2010–11. Finally, Van Gundy modernized the offense by targeting stretch forwards and emphasizing the long ball. Last season the Pistons launched 2,043 three-pointers, 463 more than their previous high. More willing shooters arrived this summer, including 6' 10" Ersan Ilyasova and 6' 7" Stanley Johnson, the No. 8 pick out of Arizona.

Detroit hasn't made the playoffs since 2009, which has led to changes throughout the organization. Van Gundy's Pistons still lack proven defenders and depth, but his wheeling and dealing hasn't been wasted motion.

—B.G.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Detroit

Stan Van Gundy has totally overhauled the roster, but where has it gotten him?

Andre Drummond is his only clear plus player. **Reggie Jackson** and **Brandon Jennings**

are average or below-average. From a team-building perspective, you want better balance than having two of your top three guys be point guards. . . . In Orlando, Van Gundy won because he had talent and a unique system at the time. Now, he doesn't have much talent and a lot of teams are playing that same spread pick-and-roll system. . . . I understand why he didn't re-sign Greg Monroe, because of the fit with Drummond and both of them clogging the lane, but that's talent leaving that they can't afford to have leave. . . . Drummond's not a finished product by any means, but his potential gets every coach and GM excited. He's not this major all-around offensive threat, but the way he gets his points puts a lot of pressure on defenses: high-percentage looks that bend a defense toward the paint and away from shooters. . . . Jackson had some success spot-starting in Oklahoma City, so I can see what they were thinking [when they signed him to a five-year, \$80 million deal]. The question is, Who starts? Jackson? Jennings, once he is back [from a torn Achilles, in December at the earliest]? Both of them? I don't think they can play them together. Neither of them are shooters, neither are great defenders. . . . **Marcus Morris** is underqualified to be a starting three. He's worse than his twin brother [Suns forward Markieff] in all the major ways, and he's stuck in between positions.

TELLING NUMBER

9.0

Offensive rebounds per 100 possessions for **Andre Drummond** last season. Only one player in NBA history has averaged more: Jayson Williams of the New Jersey Nets, who did it twice (1995–96 and '97–98).

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH DEREK FISHER

(2nd season with Knicks)

2014-15 RECORD 17-65

(5th in Atlantic)

PG JOSE CALDERON

9.1 PPG; 4.7 APG; 41.5 FG%; 41.5 3FG%

SG ARRON AFFLALO*

13.3 PPG; 3.2 RPG; 42.4 FG%; 35.4 3FG%

SF CARMELO ANTHONY

24.2 PPG; 6.6 RPG; 44.4 FG%; 34.1 3FG%

PF DERRICK WILLIAMS*

8.3 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 0.1 BPG; 44.7 FG%

C ROBIN LOPEZ*

9.6 PPG; 6.7 RPG; 1.4 BPG; 53.5 FG%

BENCH

PG LANGSTON GALLOWAY

11.8 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 3.3 APG; 39.9 FG%

PF KRISTAPS PORZINGIS (R)

11.0 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 49.6 FG%; 35.9 3FG%

SF CLEANTHONY EARLY

5.4 PPG; 2.5 RPG; 0.9 APG; 35.5 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION
(R) ROOKIE, EUROPEAN STATS

NEW YORK
Knicks

MODEST PROPOSAL TRADE CARMELO

EAST
13

When team president Phil Jackson drafted Latvian big man Kristaps Porzingis in June, the message was clear: The reconstruction is on. Porzingis, 20, has Dirk Nowitzki-like skills, but it will be at least three years before he fully develops them. By that time Carmelo Anthony will be a shadow of his All-Star self. Anthony is 31 and coming off an injury to his left knee that sidelined him for two months in 2014-15. And after New York whiffed (again) on the big names in free agency—guard Arron Afflalo and center Robin Lopez amounted to consolation prizes—you have to wonder: What's the point of keeping Carmelo?

There isn't one. When the Knicks re-signed Anthony to a five-year, \$124 million deal in 2014, there was logic to it. Capped out, they could only throw money at their own players, and they weren't willing to let a talent like Anthony just walk away, not when he can be a trade chip later. Anthony's trade value is high; he's not a No. 1 option on a title contender, but he could thrive in a supporting role. (Hello, Chicago!) Swapping him could further infuse the roster with young talent and draft picks while alleviating the pressure to win right away. Rather than scrambling to squeeze into the playoffs now, the Knicks can patiently develop Porzingis, a potentially devastating inside-out scorer, and shrewdly gain cap flexibility to add the right pieces around him. Jackson can show the New York faithful that he knows how to build a winner, not buy one.

—C.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up New York

From what I can tell, **Kristaps Porzingis** was the best player they could get at [the No. 4] pick. But they lost out in free agency. They brought Phil Jackson in for a reason: to get involved with the top-tier players. They ended up signing third-tier players.

Arron Afflalo's coming off a bad year in Portland. **Sasha Vujacic** has been in Europe for the last four years. **Robin Lopez**, **Kevin Seraphin**, **Kyle O'Quinn**—I just don't see it....

I was not impressed with **Derek Fisher** last season. He knows the triangle, but he was one of the poorer coaches in the league in timeouts, ATOs, end-of-game plays, that kind of stuff.... The big question is whether **Carmelo Anthony** can play within the triangle. It's an equal opportunity offense: sharing the ball, moving side to side. Melo might be the best one-on-one scorer in the league, but those are things he's never been good at.... My gut feeling is that halfway through the season—I don't want to say they drop [the triangle], but they'll start to use more NBA sets, more floor spacing, a little more screening. The name of the game is to win, and New York is a very tough place with very sophisticated fans.... They brought in Vujacic because he knows the system, and they'll probably look to him to show how the offense is supposed to be run.... Of all the guys in the frontcourt, O'Quinn has the most upside. He's athletic, he's long, he can rebound. He's either going to make a splash or he's going to be a third-string center for the rest of his career.... We talk about the triangle, but they really needed to get better on defense. Did they? I don't think so.

TELLING NUMBER

394

Rebounds for **Robin Lopez** last season with the Trail Blazers. That's 56 more than any Knick had—and Lopez grabbed his in just 59 games.



**HELLO,
MELO**

Not even a healthy Anthony could salvage a disastrous season: New York was just 10-30 when its star played.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH SCOTT SKILES

(1st season with Magic)

2014-15 RECORD 25-57

(5th in Southeast)

PG ELFRID PAYTON

8.9 PPG; 6.5 APG; 1.7 SPG; 42.5 FG%

SG VICTOR OLADIPO

17.9 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 43.6 FG%; 33.9 3FG%

SF TOBIAS HARRIS

17.1 PPG; 6.3 RPG; 46.6 FG%; 36.4 3FG%

PF AARON GORDON

5.2 PPG; 3.6 RPG; 0.5 BPG; 44.7 FG%

C NIKOLA VUCEVIC

19.3 PPG; 10.9 RPG; 2.0 APG; 52.4 FG%

BENCH

SG EVAN FOURNIER

12.0 PPG; 2.6 RPG; 44.0 FG%; 37.8 3FG%

PF CHANNING FRYE

7.3 PPG; 3.9 RPG; 39.2 FG%; 39.3 3FG%

PG C.J. WATSON*

10.0 PPG; 3.6 APG; 43.4 FG%; 40.0 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

ORLANDO
Magic

MODEST PROPOSAL
KEEP GOING TO THE RACK

EAST 14 When Scott Skiles accepted the coaching job in Orlando, the former Magic point guard had several goals. Impose discipline: Orlando (14.9 turnovers per game) was among the sloppiest teams in the league last year. Improve on defense: The Magic finished 24th in efficiency. And make the top priority on offense clear: Attack the rim.

Despite their young, athletic lineup, the Magic finished last in the NBA in free throw attempts in 2014-15 (19.1 per game); in fact, their total of 1,565 was the fourth lowest in history for an 82-game season. And it wasn't as if they were loaded with elite jump shooters; no player cracked 40% from three.

Orlando has players who *should* get to the stripe. Power forward Aaron Gordon and shooting guard Victor Oladipo are dynamic and aggressive. Nikola Vucevic is a bruising center. Point guard Elfrid Payton was effective at getting to the rim as a rookie, but rarely drew contact. Skiles's message to them: *Attack. Be active. Don't settle for the jumper.* To encourage that mentality, Skiles implemented an up-tempo system in training camp with a greater emphasis on ball movement and penetration.

An asset to that scheme will be 6' 8", 218-pound rookie Mario Hezonja, the No. 5 pick, out of Croatia. His draft stock soared because of his shooting range, but in summer league he showcased a Manu Ginóbili-like flair for finishing at the rim. Hezonja, 20, will have to make significant strides defensively to crack Skiles's rotation. When he does, he will threaten defenses and make the rebuilding Magic a far more dangerous team. —C.M.



TELLING NUMBER

11

Players age 22 and younger who averaged 17 points and six rebounds while shooting 35% from three-point range. **Tobias Harris** became the most recent, last season.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Orlando

The best thing they did this summer was bring in **Scott Skiles**. They were just running in quicksand. They really underachieved. And with all their athleticism they just played so poorly on defense. Skiles is a defensive coach who will make guys accountable.... I love that they re-signed **Tobias Harris**, though they probably overpaid a little bit [four years, \$64 million]. He fits right in with the larger trend of playing small, spacing the floor. He's a good locker-room guy, and he can make shots. Harris will go back and forth from the three to the four, but I imagine a lot of that depends on how **Aaron Gordon** comes along. He impressed me in the summer league.... If they start **Channing Frye** at the four and **Nikola Vucevic** at center, they'll be weak again defensively. And they're small at the two with [6' 4"] **Victor Oladipo**.... **Elfrid Payton** is good defensively, and he's a good penetrator. But he makes a lot of mistakes—leaves his feet, makes bad passes. During the summer league you could see that his shooting got a little better, but it's still not good enough. To me, his shot is broken.... They'd be making a huge mistake if they bury **Mario Hezonja** or don't give him minutes early. He can do one thing better than anybody else they have by far: shoot the three. He doesn't have the quickest feet, but he's got great size at 6' 8" and a nice body. He also may be the most athletic guy on this team. Seriously.... **C.J. Watson** was a real good pickup. There will be times at the end of games when teams are going to go under against Payton on pick-and-rolls, and he'll become a liability. You can't do that with Watson.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH **BRETT BROWN**

(3rd season with 76ers)

2014-15 RECORD **18-64**

(4th in Atlantic)

PG **ISAIAH CANAAN**

9.2 PPG; 2.1 APG; 38.6 FG%; 37.0 3FG%

SG **NIK STAUSKAS***

4.4 PPG; 1.2 RPG; 36.5 FG%; 32.2 3FG%

SF **ROBERT COVINGTON**

13.5 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 39.5 FG%; 37.4 3FG%

PF **NERLENS NOEL**

9.9 PPG; 8.1 RPG; 1.9 BPG; 46.2 FG%

C **JAHLIL OKAFOR (R)**

17.3 PPG; 8.5 RPG; 1.4 BPG; 66.4 FG%

BENCH

PG **TONY WROTEN**

16.9 PPG; 5.2 APG; 40.3 FG%; 26.1 3FG%

SG **HOLLIS THOMPSON**

8.8 PPG; 2.8 RPG; 41.3 FG%; 40.1 3FG%

PF **CARL LANDRY***

7.2 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 0.2 BPG; 51.5 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

PHILADELPHIA
76ers

MODEST PROPOSAL SPEED UP THE PROCESS

EAST
15

Trust the process. That's the mantra in Philadelphia, where the draft-pick-stockpiling, cheap-young-talent-adding Sixers are poised to finish with fewer than 20 wins for the third straight season—and GM Sam Hinkie doesn't seem to be the least bit concerned about it. Pick a statistic, any statistic, from 2014–15: last in the NBA in shooting (40.8%); last in turnovers (16.9 per game); 25th in fouls committed (21.7). Yet despite tens of millions in cap space, Hinkie refused to address a few of his roster's gaping holes by spending on a savvy shooter with a championship pedigree (such as Danny Green) or an experienced floor leader (Mo Williams, Jameer Nelson). None of those signings would get Philly into the playoffs this season, but they could have significantly improved the team on the court while—and this is important—bringing lessons learned from winning cultures to a locker room that has never experienced success.

Instead, the Sixers will slowly, sloppily sink back into the Eastern Conference cellar. The No. 3 pick out of Duke, center Jahlil Okafor, should contend for Rookie of the Year through sheer number of touches alone; his pairing with shot-blocking Nerlens Noel offers a nice offense/defense dynamic in the frontcourt. Hinkie did snap up guard Nik Stauskas, a former lottery pick, and veteran forward Carl Landry from the cap-clearing Kings. But point guard is woefully undermanned, and there are few proven scorers on the wing, freeing defenses to key on Okafor. It all adds up to another lost season, another step in a process with no end in sight. —C.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Philadelphia

The roster is set up to lose. They're awful. Where do you go with this team? They've been losing for so long, accumulating draft picks. The thing about the draft picks is that they're duplicating—I just don't understand that.... I don't see, at all, the combination of **Nerlens Noel** at power forward and **Jahlil Okafor** at center. That's probably how they'll start. Okafor is legit. You can build your team around him. But Noel's a center too. He's not a power forward. How's he going to go out and guard stretch fours? And then opponents don't even have to guard him. Noel can't shoot past 10 feet.... If you look at the rest of their roster, I think the only bright spot is **Robert Covington**. He has consistently shown improvement.... They gave up their former lottery pick in [point guard] Michael Carter-Williams. I don't know their reasoning. So instead they're bringing in a bunch of guys to lose. The most important position is the point guard. Now, there was a pretty damn good point guard out there in the draft in Emmanuel Mudiay, and they passed over him. You would've had your point guard for the future and your center for the future.... **Brett Brown**, at least, makes them play hard all the time. He kept them believing that they were making progress. He tried to implement a lot of the things the Spurs did. He couldn't do it all because they really had no point guard.... I don't like **Tony Wroten's** game. I don't think he's a point guard who's going to distribute the ball well enough; he just wants to score.... Remember: They scored 92 points a game last season. You can't win in this league scoring 92 points.

TELLING NUMBER

1

Rookies in NBA history who have averaged at least 1.8 steals and 1.9 blocks: **Nerlens Noel**, who did both last season.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH **BILLY DONOVAN**

(1st season with Thunder)

2014-15 RECORD **45-37**

(2nd in Northwest)

PG **RUSSELL WESTBROOK**

28.1 PPG; 8.6 APG; 7.3 RPG; 42.6 FG%

SG **ANDRE ROBERSON**

3.4 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 0.8 SPG; 45.8 FG%

SF **KEVIN DURANT**

25.4 PPG; 6.6 RPG; 51.0 FG%; 40.3 3FG%

PF **SERGE IBAKA**

14.3 PPG; 7.8 RPG; 2.4 BPG; 47.6 FG%

C **STEVEN ADAMS**

7.7 PPG; 7.5 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 54.4 FG%

BENCH

SG **DION WAITERS**

11.8 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 39.6 FG%; 29.7 3FG%

C **ENES KANTER**

15.5 PPG; 8.9 RPG; 0.4 BPG; 51.9 FG%

SF **KYLE SINGLER**

6.0 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 38.6 FG%; 39.8 3FG%

OKLAHOMA CITY
Thunder

MODEST PROPOSAL

BE FLEXIBLE WITH POSITIONS

WEST
1

Part of LeBron James's incredible value lies in his ability to slide seamlessly between forward positions. The same is true of Kevin Durant. No opponent is capable of fully shutting down the 6' 9" Durant's far-reaching and wide-ranging game, with slower bigs especially ill-suited to the task. Durant unlocks something special—and upends an opponent's rotational defense—when he plays at power forward, something he has done in brief stretches.

First-year Thunder coach Billy Donovan ought to explore that dynamic more often. Oklahoma City has players to fill minutes at the four behind starter Serge Ibaka, though none really thrive. Durant certainly could, but Donovan would have to juggle the team's established substitution pattern. By pulling Durant out of games midway through the first quarter, Donovan could create a nice window of opportunity for all involved. Point guard Russell Westbrook would get an early, pace-setting turn at the reins. Steven Adams could exit with Durant to bring in backup center Enes Kanter, who is best when playing with a defensive safety net like Ibaka and a playmaker like Westbrook. Then, after a few minutes, Durant can return in Ibaka's place to give the lineup its optimal speed and stretch.

There are a lot of interests to balance in Oklahoma City this season, not the least of which is keeping Durant, a free agent next summer, happy. But as long as Durant is game, Donovan has good reason to dedicate even more time and attention to expanding KD's positional options to get the most out of his star.

—Rob Mahoney



TELLING NUMBER

593

Points scored

by **Russell Westbrook**

in transition, the most in the league.

(James Harden was a distant second, with 514.) The scoring champ also had an NBA-high 544 possessions in transition.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Oklahoma City

For them to progress, they probably had to get rid of Scott Brooks. He was a good coach who connected with the players, but he had weaknesses, timeout plays being one of the biggest. It will be a big adjustment for **Billy Donovan**, but at the same time Sam Presti is a very heavy-handed GM. He's like Joe Dumars was. Presti hired Donovan's staff for him. . . . The relationship [Donovan] has with **Russell Westbrook** is more important than the one with **Kevin Durant**. Russ is a hard guy to coach. You have to connect with him. . . . They have great depth. **Kyle Singler** is an ideal complementary player. I thought **Steven Adams** took a step back last year. There were times that he was out there getting in scraps and being more of a distraction than helping the team. **Anthony Morrow** was a great get for them. He can space the floor. You can't help as much on Russ's penetration, and it's one less guy you can double-team Durant with. . . . Was **Enes Kanter** worth the money [four years, \$70 million]? No, but they are all in. I don't think anyone would double him, but he can shoot elbow jumpers. If he can make them, he will be a real weapon. . . . At the end of the year before last and at the beginning of last year, **Serge Ibaka** was way too focused on showing everyone he was a great shooter. They need him to affect the game defensively first. . . . **Dion Waiters** is a wild card. Will he be like Reggie Jackson and get jealous when he's not getting his shots? They don't need a one-on-one player; they have two of the best. They need a guy who takes away the help.



THUNDER BALLER

Durant was hobbled by a fracture in his right foot all season, but when he played, he had a strong presence: OKC went 18-9 with him in the lineup.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH STEVE KERR

(2nd season with Warriors)

2014-15 RECORD 65-17

(1st in Pacific)

PG STEPHEN CURRY

23.8 PPG; 7.7 APG; 48.7 FG%; 44.3 3FG%

SG KLAY THOMPSON

21.7 PPG; 3.2 RPG; 46.3 FG%; 43.9 3FG%

SF HARRISON BARNES

10.1 PPG; 5.5 RPG; 48.2 FG%; 40.5 3FG%

PF DRAYMOND GREEN

11.7 PPG; 8.2 RPG; 44.3 FG%; 33.7 3FG%

C ANDREW BOGUT

6.3 PPG; 8.1 RPG; 1.7 BPG; 56.3 FG%

BENCH

SF ANDRE IGUODALA

7.8 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 46.6 FG%; 34.9 3FG%

PG SHAUN LIVINGSTON

5.9 PPG; 3.3 APG; 0.6 SPG; 50.0 FG%

PF MARREESE SPEIGHTS

10.4 PPG; 4.3 RPG; 0.4 BPG; 49.2 FG%

GOLDEN STATE
Warriors

MODEST PROPOSAL

TRUST THE FRONT OFFICE

WEST
2

The Warriors opened their title defense with a sequence in their first preseason game that lit up social media. Stephen Curry pushed the ball upcourt, dribbling behind his back as he went. The reigning MVP then flipped a pass to Klay Thompson, who moved the ball on to Draymond Green, who returned the ball to Curry, who had burst open in front of Golden State's bench. Curry quickly launched a three and, before the ball swished through the hoop, turned to Andre Iguodala, who wasn't even in the game, for a celebratory high five.

That eight-second possession displayed the pace, unselfishness, firepower, chemistry and confidence that delivered Golden State's first championship in 40 years. It also showcased GM Bob Myers's prescience. It was Myers who, shortly after his promotion to GM in April 2012, signed Curry to a bargain four-year, \$44 million contract extension. Myers plucked Green in the second round of the '12 draft, constructed a sign-and-trade for Iguodala in July '13 and reached an extension with Thompson last fall so his potential departure didn't hang over the Warriors' 67-win season.

Myers took home the 2015 Executive of the Year award, but he didn't pause to take a breath. This summer he locked up Green for five years at \$82 million and executed a pair of luxury-tax-saving trades that netted Kings forward Jason Thompson for David Lee. Remarkably, Myers has all his core pieces locked up through '16-'17. With the heavy lifting complete, he's earned the right to sit back and enjoy the show. —B.G.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Golden State

They're the title favorites again. They're a Swiss Army knife on both offense and defense when it comes to their team versatility.... Playing devil's advocate, they never really faced the starting point guard in any playoff series. That's nitpicking, but it was the perfect setup for **Stephen Curry**. You can't let him save all his juice for offense, because he's so lethal with the ball.... Curry's defense can definitely improve, but he became a better system defender. They switched a lot with all their versatile guys, but they tried really hard not to let Curry get switched onto bigs or wings who could post him up in isolation spots.... I can see **Klay Thompson** being a No. 1 scoring option on his own team. You have to limit his clean looks, you can't ever sag off of him on the weak side, you can't help off of him.... They don't need to run any plays for **Harrison Barnes**; he's able to create things with his activity and off-ball movement. Big-time athlete. Some of their versatility came from his ability to defend stretch fours and not give anything up. He has unbelievable strength—strong legs, strong core—to hold his own in the post.... **Draymond Green's** greatest strength is that he guards multiple positions and he goes all out. He's just suffocating everyone from guards at the line to big guys on the block, and he's moving smoothly between those responsibilities as possessions unfold. He's a great, loud defender: He gets into it, the crowd gets into it, and opponents feel the impact. How many times did they turn his defensive plays into three-pointers on the other end?

TELLING NUMBER

.594

Effective field goal percentage (which gives added weight to three-pointers) for **Stephen Curry**, 13th-highest ever for a player 6' 3" or shorter. The top mark belongs to his coach, Steve Kerr.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH DOC RIVERS

(3rd season with Clippers)

2014-15 RECORD 56-26

(2nd in Pacific)

PG CHRIS PAUL

19.1 PPG; 10.2 APG; 48.5 FG%; 39.8 3FG%

SG J.J. REDICK

16.4 PPG; 2.1 RPG; 47.7 FG%; 43.7 3FG%

SF PAUL PIERCE*

11.9 PPG; 4.0 RPG; 44.7 FG%; 38.9 3FG%

PF BLAKE GRIFFIN

21.9 PPG; 7.6 RPG; 5.3 APG; 50.2 FG%

C DEANDRE JORDAN

11.5 PPG; 15.0 RPG; 2.2 BPG; 71.0 FG%

BENCH

SG JAMAL CRAWFORD

15.8 PPG; 2.5 APG; 39.6 FG%; 32.7 3FG%

PF JOSH SMITH*

12.4 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 1.4 BPG; 41.9 FG%

SF WESLEY JOHNSON*

9.9 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 41.4 FG%; 35.1 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

LOS ANGELES Clippers

MODEST PROPOSAL

NEW GUYS, GET IN LINE

WEST
3

In hopes of improving his much-maligned bench this summer, Doc Rivers rolled the dice by acquiring two of the NBA's most polarizing players: 6' 5" guard Lance Stephenson and 6' 9" forward Josh Smith. In so doing, Rivers bet not only on their talent but also on his ability to harness it.

While Stephenson, 25, and Smith, 29, both bring defensive versatility and experience, Rivers must demand greater restraint when it comes to their freelancing and firing up. Stephenson shot 17.1% on three-pointers last season, the worst mark ever for a player with at least 100 attempts. Instead of emerging as the face of the Hornets, he was a rotation castoff by season's end. Smith's bricklaying, meanwhile, has long been a short-coming; in 2014-15 he hit 31.6% from deep and 31.0% on long two-pointers. The Pistons paid him \$26 million before last season just to go away.

Chris Paul, Blake Griffin and DeAndre Jordan are a potent trio, but there's a limit to how much self-inflicted damage Los Angeles can overcome in the West. The Warriors and the Spurs, two pass-heavy juggernauts loaded with unselfish role players, punish opponents that overrely on low-percentage hoists and ill-advised one-on-one forays.

Because both Stephenson (in Indiana) and Smith (in Houston) have advanced to the conference finals—while Paul & Co. haven't—Rivers may need to hard-sell the newcomers on his team-first vision. If Stephenson and Smith don't accept the importance of reining in their me-first tendencies, the Clippers are headed for another date with frustration. —B.G.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Los Angeles

Their roster is something to be excited about, but I'm not sold at all on the fits—they have a lot of ball-stoppers. The only guy who is great off the ball on this team is **J.J. Redick**. . . . They already had personality conflicts, and now they add wild cards in **Josh Smith** and **Lance Stephenson**. That could get ugly. . . . One thing to watch is whether Doc Rivers limits **Chris Paul**'s minutes to save him for the playoffs. Paul doesn't like to sit out, but he should consider it at his age [30] and with his injury history. . . . **Blake Griffin** isn't getting enough credit for improving as an all-around player. He has improved his jumper and really grinds on the boards. He used to dribble coast to coast in high school, and now he's doing that effectively in the NBA too. . . . Defensively, **DeAndre Jordan** is the whole show inside for them. What opened my eyes was how he handled Dwight Howard in the playoffs. They should try to get him more involved on offense, but there just aren't enough touches. Jordan said he wanted more this summer, and he might wind up with fewer. That's a problem. . . . Redick will never get the credit he deserves. Defenses have to lock into him when he comes off pin-downs, and that lets everyone else play one-on-one against their guys. . . . **Paul Pierce** brings experience and swagger, but I wouldn't want him starting at the three in the West. They'll miss Matt Barnes more than they think they will. . . . Stephenson, **Austin Rivers** and **Jamal Crawford** have eerily similar games. There's not an obvious way to fit them together on the second unit so that they complement each other.

TELLING NUMBER

4

Times that **Chris Paul** has led the league in assists, as he did last season (10.2 per game). Only five players—Bob Cousy, Oscar Robertson, John Stockton, Jason Kidd and Steve Nash—have won more assist titles.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH KEVIN MCHALE

(5th season with Rockets)

2014-15 RECORD 56-26

(1st in Southwest)

PG PATRICK BEVERLY

10.1 PPG; 3.4 APG; 38.3 FG%; 35.6 3FG%

SG JAMES HARDEN

27.4 PPG; 7.0 APG; 44.0 FG%; 37.5 3FG%

SF TREVOR ARIZA

12.8 PPG; 5.6 RPG; 40.2 FG%; 35.0 3FG%

PF TERRENCE JONES

11.7 PPG; 6.7 RPG; 1.8 BPG; 52.8 FG%

C DWIGHT HOWARD

15.8 PPG; 10.5 RPG; 1.3 BPG; 59.3 FG%

BENCH

PG TY LAWSON*

15.2 PPG; 9.6 APG; 43.6 FG%; 34.1 3FG%

SG COREY BREWER

11.9 PPG; 3.6 RPG; 42.9 FG%; 28.4 3FG%

PF DONATAS MOTIEJŪNAS

12.0 PPG; 5.9 RPG; 50.4 FG%; 36.8 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

HOUSTON Rockets

MODEST PROPOSAL

DEVELOP AN EVEN DEEPER BENCH

WEST
4

Houston has so much talent on its roster that it can be daunting to a newcomer. Swingman K.J. McDaniels found that out last February after he was acquired from the 76ers; after averaging 25.4 minutes in Philadelphia, he played just 33 *total* the rest of the season. Then over the summer the Rockets only got longer, stronger and more athletic by landing point guard Ty Lawson and drafting 6' 9" Sam Dekker out of Wisconsin with the 18th choice.

Nevertheless, Houston rewarded McDaniels with a three-year, \$10 million contract in the off-season, and he needs to be part of the rotation. Taken by Philly with the 32nd pick in 2014, the 6' 6" 205-pounder from Clemson has the same tools—energetic defense, hard cutting, heady transition play—that have served Corey Brewer so well with the Rockets. McDaniels, 22, also possesses a skill most NBA wing players don't have: He can block shots. Last year with the Sixers, McDaniels had a higher block percentage than everyone but center Nerlens Noel, and opposing shooters saw their field goal percentages drop by 2.1% when they faced him.

There's much work to be done on McDaniels's jumper (39.6% from the floor) and his handle (105 turnovers against just 72 assists). But if Houston wants to sustain its run as a title contender, it will have to offset its high-priced talent with players who can outperform their contracts. Developing a prospect like McDaniels will preserve the depth that has been such a vital ingredient in the Rockets' resurgence. —R.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Houston

There were times last year that you saw **James Harden** and **Dwight Howard** play well together. But it was in spurts. I don't see a ton of synergy there—they're Stockton and Malone. I don't think Dwight is ever going to be a 20-point-per-game guy again. It's not like he has developed any new skills. . . . They were a pretty good team defensively. Harden was a little more attentive. He was good on the ball. He anticipated well and got steals. But you still try to attack him to wear him down. . . . [Harden] was the MVP. It shouldn't have even been close. When Dwight was out, he carried them. You knew who he was, you knew what he could do, and he still did it. He gets called selfish, but he averaged seven assists. . . . Every year I think **Trevor Ariza** is a little overrated, that he is slowing down, and he just keeps playing. He's still in the top five defensively at his position. He is really good at reading the ball, playing off the ball, creating steals. . . . They will be fine without Josh Smith. **Donatas Motiejūnas** can give them more consistent three-point shooting. **Clint Capela** affects games by blocking shots and getting to the boards. **Terrence Jones** gets two or three easy scores just by sprinting the floor every time and has improved his three-point range. . . . They didn't give up any contributors to get **Ty Lawson**, who can get seven, eight assists per game pretty easy. He's an excellent penetrate-and-pitch guy. He understands angles. He will get guys open looks. He is fine defensively. His offense is his best defense. He puts pressure on you to run the whole game.

TELLING NUMBER

7

Shot attempts of more than 10 feet by **Dwight Howard** in 58 games (including the playoffs) last year, out of 605 total tries. Howard made two of them.



CASE IN POINTS

Harden finished second in the scoring race in the most consistent way imaginable: He averaged 27.4 at home, on the road, before the All-Star break and after it.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH GREGG POPOVICH

(20th season with Spurs)

2014-15 RECORD 55-27

(2nd in Southwest)

PG TONY PARKER

14.4 PPG; 4.9 APG; 48.6 FG%; 42.7 3FG%

SG DANNY GREEN

11.7 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 43.6 FG%; 41.8 3FG%

SF KAWHI LEONARD

16.5 PPG; 7.2 RPG; 47.9 FG%; 34.9 3FG%

PF LAMARCUS ALDRIDGE*

23.4 PPG; 10.2 RPG; 46.6 FG%; 35.2 3FG%

C TIM DUNCAN

13.9 PPG; 9.1 RPG; 2.0 BPG; 51.2 FG%

BENCH

SF MANU GINÓBILI

10.5 PPG; 4.2 APG; 42.6 FG%; 34.5 3FG%

PF DAVID WEST*

11.7 PPG; 6.8 RPG; 3.4 APG; 47.1 FG%

PG PATTY MILLS

6.9 PPG; 1.7 APG; 38.1 FG%; 34.1 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

SAN ANTONIO Spurs

MODEST PROPOSAL

ADJUST THE POINT GUARD'S ROLE

WEST
5

If the last 12 months have been any indication, Tony Parker's days as a star-level contributor are coming to an end. That isn't to say he won't have his moments; the point guard is still cagey and skilled enough to get to the rim and make winning plays. He's merely been slowed by age and injury to the point of inconsistency. His offensive rating last year was 105, the lowest since his third season.

San Antonio's attack is based on a complex choreography that doesn't require Parker to overhandle the ball. Nevertheless, his ability to attack the basket in quick bursts and break down a defense off the dribble have always had value in coach Gregg Popovich's system. The fact that the 33-year-old Parker is losing a step—as was apparent last season and only reinforced in his lackluster performance for France at EuroBasket over the summer—means that some restructuring would naturally be in order.

The Spurs have options. Signing free-agent power forward LaMarcus Aldridge gives Popovich the kind of isolated scoring option he hasn't had in years. But he needs to take advantage of Aldridge's abilities as a facilitator as well as a go-to scorer. Small forward Kawhi Leonard has become a more creative player and should be encouraged to further that aspect of his game. Crisp, fluid ball movement should still be the Spurs' calling card, but the roles of the players running the offense—Parker especially—need to be reshuffled.

—R.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up San Antonio

LaMarcus Aldridge is a mid-range shooter. That's what they really need from him. He and **Tim Duncan** remind me of [David] Robinson and Duncan. I wouldn't be surprised if Pop [**Gregg Popovich**] goes back to some of the stuff they ran back then. There will not be as much of an emphasis on three-point shooting. They will work the elbows, do a lot to get the ball into the post.... You see some miles on **David West**. The thing he brought to Indiana that was most important was toughness and leadership. That's not as big a need in San Antonio. I thought getting another stretch four would have been a priority.... **Manu Ginóbili** can still step

behind the pick-and-roll and make big shots. He doesn't beat guys as well anymore, and he isn't as consistent finishing. He's a playmaker, but it's more in spurts and flashes now.... **Tony Parker** needs to have his minutes cut. Point guard is such a tough position in the West; it's harder for him to be consistent. He still shoots a good percentage but he forces a lot of shots.... **Danny Green**

is 0 for 6 or 5 for 6. You don't know what you are going to get from him. He gets away with being an O.K. defender because they have great team defense.... They didn't replace Marco Belinelli, so there's a lot of pressure on Green and **Kawhi Leonard** to carry them from three-point range. Maybe **Jimmer Fredette** will step up and be Stephen Jackson this year.... Pop's in the upper echelon of play-calling. He plays different lineups. He shows you the unexpected. He emphasizes defense and doesn't allow any slippage. [But] what sets him apart is managing an entire season. He sees the big picture.

TELLING NUMBER

96.4

Defensive rating of **Kawhi Leonard** last season, the best in the NBA. It was the ninth time a Spur led the league in the past 20 years.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH DAVE JOERGER

(3rd season with Grizzlies)

2014-15 RECORD 55-27

(2nd in Southwest)

PG MIKE CONLEY

15.8 PPG; 5.4 APG; 44.6 FG%; 38.6 3FG%

SG COURTNEY LEE

10.1 PPG; 2.3 RPG; 44.8 FG%; 40.2 3FG%

SF JEFF GREEN

15.0 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 43.0 FG%; 33.2 3FG%

PF ZACH RANDOLPH

16.1 PPG; 10.5 RPG; 2.2 APG; 48.7 FG%

C MARC GASOL

17.4 PPG; 7.8 RPG; 1.6 BPG; 49.4 FG%

BENCH

SG TONY ALLEN

8.6 PPG; 4.4 RPG; 2.0 SPG; 49.5 FG%

PG BENO UDRIS

7.7 PPG; 2.8 APG; 0.6 SPG; 48.7 FG%

PF BRANDAN WRIGHT*

7.3 PPG; 4.3 RPG; 1.3 BPG; 64.2 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

MEMPHIS Grizzlies

MODEST PROPOSAL

DON'T SIT THE STOPPER

WEST
6

Tony Allen is a defensive star. At 6' 4", with long arms, quick hands and a great mind, he can latch onto any perimeter player in the NBA and turn his life into a waking terror.

Allen's offense is another story: He's not creative, and his shooting range ends at 10 feet. That makes it hard for the Grizzlies to give him extended minutes, especially in the postseason. During a second-round loss last spring, the Warriors "covered" Allen with 7-foot center Andrew Bogut, who played far enough off his man to still clog the paint and crowd post-ups. The strategy showed that the best defense against one of the game's best defenders is to pay him little mind: Memphis averaged 70.7 points per 100 possessions when Allen was on the court in a crucial Game 4 defeat.

It makes sense for the Grizz to sit the 33-year-old Allen for short stretches when floor spacing becomes a problem. But doing that also gives opponents exactly what they want: a dogged competitor and ferocious stopper on the bench at critical moments. Dave Joerger and his staff need to find the means to keep Allen out there and still make defenses pay. They could toy with placement, timing and misdirection on their sets to try to enhance Allen as an offensive threat. They could also make sure to develop shooters to stretch the D even if it sags off Allen.

It won't be easy; there is only so much that can be done to accommodate a nonshooter. The payoff of playing Allen more often, though, could be Memphis's first trip to the Finals.

—R.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Memphis

They are what they are: a physical, paint-based team that can't shoot. They have to continue to bang inside because their two best players are **Zach Randolph** and **Marc Gasol**, but they didn't seem to have that same punch last year. Neither is a great athlete, and as you add miles to them they become a little more human. Randolph didn't get to the free throw line as much, and his rebounds were down. . . . They shot 34% from three last year and they added **Matt Barnes**. I can't figure that out. Barnes has improved from the corner, but no one is going to deny him the ball. **Vince Carter** is at the very dusk of his career. **Jeff Green** is consistently inconsistent; he looked lost out there last year. . . . **Tony Allen** doesn't try to do things he can't do. He's as good as anyone at one-on-one defense. He can guard any three or two. He wants a consistent role; sometimes that went up and down with the addition of Green. Now you add Barnes to that mix, and you have to wonder how that is going to affect him. . . . If **Mike Conley** were in the East he would be an All-Star. He's very good defensively, on the ball, off the ball. If he had two good shooters on the wings, that would add two assists per game, and he would be in the top five. He has to take a lot of his three-point shots at the end of the shot clock—pressure shots, and he makes them. . . . **Dave Joerger** is a fine coach, but I don't see a bunch of guys who have a connection with him, who look like they are out there playing for him. When you add a polarizing figure like [Barnes] to the mix, that's a potential disaster.

TELLING NUMBER

1

Grizzlies who have been named All-NBA first team in the 20-year history of the franchise: **Marc Gasol**, who made it last year. The center was a second-teamer in 2013-14.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH ALVIN GENTRY

(1st season with Pelicans)

2014-15 RECORD 45-37

(5th in Southwest)

PG JRUE HOLIDAY

14.8 PPG; 6.9 APG; 1.6 SPG; 44.6 FG%

SG ERIC GORDON

13.4 PPG; 3.8 APG; 41.1 FG%; 44.8 3FG%

SF DANTE CUNNINGHAM

5.2 PPG; 3.9 RPG; 0.6 BPG; 45.7 FG%

PF ANTHONY DAVIS

24.4 PPG; 10.2 RPG; 2.9 BPG; 53.5 FG%

C OMER ASIK

7.3 PPG; 9.8 RPG; 0.7 BPG; 51.7 FG%

BENCH

SG TYREKE EVANS

16.6 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 6.6 APG; 44.7 FG%

PF RYAN ANDERSON

13.7 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 39.9 FG%; 34.0 3FG%

SF QUINCY PONDEXTER

7.2 PPG; 2.6 RPG; 42.1 FG%; 37.3 3FG%

NEW ORLEANS
Pelicans

MODEST PROPOSAL

USE THE BROW AT CENTER

WEST
7

New Orleans invested a total of \$78 million this summer to re-sign two centers, Omer Asik and Alexis Ajinca, who can spare Anthony Davis from the physical toll of playing the five. Those best-laid plans were challenged when Ajinca suffered a right hamstring strain that will force him to miss the start of the season, and Asik picked up an injury (right-calf strain) that will nag at him if not properly rested.

It makes sense to try to keep the lanky Davis (6' 11", 253 pounds) from taking on a taxing 82-game run as a full-time center. The logic changes, however, when the alternative there is less than adequate, like third-stringer Kendrick Perkins. Provided that Asik and Ajinca are unavailable, Davis ought to be the Pelicans' opening-night starter at center, or at the very least a regular in the center rotation. There doesn't have to be a long-term commitment. Davis can simply learn the position as he fills in for injured teammates, while also enhancing new coach Alvin Gentry's strategic options.

Davis is easily the most mobile, skilled and productive big man on the team. Putting him at center allows New Orleans to use 6' 10" sharpshooter Ryan Anderson alongside him to space the floor, which in turn would catalyze the driving games of guards Tyreke Evans and Jrue Holiday. (That's in line with the ideals of Gentry's up-tempo offense.) No one would be shocked if Davis winds up being a revelation as a center. It just might take his teammates' misfortunes to get him to play there.

—R.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up New Orleans

Alvin Gentry's style is the opposite of Monty Williams's. He is going to want to push it and loosen up the offense. Gentry promotes good feelings. I would expect them to win five, six more games just based on the coaching change. . . . One thing we know about Alvin's system, he needs three-point shooters. They have a great one in **Ryan Anderson**. **Tyreke Evans** hasn't been one. **Eric Gordon** is streaky. If I was playing that style, I'd like another reliable shooter. . . . **Anthony Davis** is a great defender—might be the best in the league—but he can be close to a 30-point-per-game scorer. You have to cover him from 18 to 20 feet, and when you step out he can go right by you. They need to treat him like Dallas treats Dirk: Put him at the free throw line and isolate him. If he extends his range to three, and there's no reason to believe he won't, he's going to be impossible to defend. . . . As they play quicker, Evans is going to be a guy who plays well. He can see the floor, he can distribute the ball. You put shooters around him and he is going to hurt you. . . . When **Jrue Holiday** is healthy, they have a nice three-guard rotation with Evans and Gordon, who can push the ball. Holiday will thrive with Alvin too. When he was an All-Star with the Sixers, Holiday was penetrating, he was going to the rack. The last two years, when he has played, he has settled for the jump shot. . . . **Omer Asik** dropped off last year. He wasn't as active as he was in Chicago or Houston. He still rebounds but he does it in shorter spurts. You don't want to play Davis against the bigger centers, but I don't know how well [Asik] fits in with what Alvin wants to do.

TELLING NUMBER

30.8

Player efficiency rating for **Anthony Davis** last season. At 22, Davis was the youngest player ever to lead the NBA in PER.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH JEFF HORNACEK

(3rd season with Suns)

2014-15 RECORD 39-43

(3rd in Pacific)

PG BRANDON KNIGHT

13.4 PPG; 4.5 APG; 35.7 FG%; 31.3 3FG%

SG ERIC BLEDSOE

17.0 PPG; 6.1 APG; 5.2 RPG; 44.7 FG%

SF P.J. TUCKER

9.1 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 43.8 FG%; 34.5 3FG%

PF MARKIEFF MORRIS

15.3 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 46.5 FG%; 31.8 3FG%

C TYSON CHANDLER*

10.3 PG; 11.5 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 66.6 FG%

BENCH

SF T.J. WARREN

6.1 PPG; 2.1 RPG; 0.6 APG; 52.8 FG%

PF MIRZA TELETOVIC*

8.5 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 38.2 FG%; 32.1 3FG%

C ALEX LEN

6.3 PPG; 6.6 RPG; 1.5 BPG; 50.7 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

PHOENIX
Suns

MODEST PROPOSAL

TRUST IN AN ERIC BLEDSOE BREAKOUT

WEST
8

The story of Eric Bledsoe's career to date would be titled *Stifled Potential*. The 2010 first-round pick spent two of his first three seasons stuck behind Chris Paul on the Clippers. While a July 2013 trade to Phoenix opened up a starting role and more responsibilities, he still had to share the ball and the acclaim with fellow lead guards Goran Dragic and Isaiah Thomas.

Meanwhile, right knee surgery in January 2014, a protracted contract negotiation that summer and an ever-changing roster around him further complicated his standing with the Suns. Was Bledsoe their guy, or not? That question was finally answered last February, when GM Ryan McDonough traded both Dragic and Thomas.

The 6' 1" Bledsoe is among the league leaders in explosiveness and fury. That is evident in his on-ball defense and in his downhill attacking style, which keeps defenses under constant pressure. Even though he's not wired as a pass-first distributor, he's a capable playmaker.

There are still looming questions. Bledsoe, 25, isn't a knockdown shooter, his body must hold up under the strain of big minutes and his taxing style of play, and he must strike the right balance with backcourt partner Brandon Knight. None of those concerns is fatal, though, in large part because Bledsoe will enter the season as his team's clear No. 1 option for the first time in his career. The light is finally green, and there's no longer anybody standing in his way.

—B.G.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Phoenix

They're fighting for the seventh or eighth seed at best, and they'll finish 10th or 11th at worst. Same range as the last few years. It's one step forward, one step back. ... If **Tyson Chandler**, **Eric Bledsoe** and **Brandon Knight** are your main guys—and that's who's getting the big money—how does that trio fit together? Both Bledsoe and Knight need the ball, and Chandler [at 33] is way older than they are. Are they trying to win right now? They're not good enough. Are they trying to win in the future? Chandler won't be an impact player down the line. ... The one big positive is that all three guys can hold their own defensively, with Bledsoe being a stud on that end. **Markieff Morris** and **P.J. Tucker** can defend too. If you put those five guys on the floor, they won't give up a lot of easy points. ... Hanging over their whole team is whether Bledsoe and Knight can play together. Bledsoe can defend twos, but he likes the ball in his hands to start the offense. Knight definitely sees himself as a one. I don't think Knight will ever become a top 10 point guard. He's the definition of *decent*. ... Bledsoe's getting to the point where he's older [25] than most people think. You can go under pick-and-rolls against him until he proves to you he can beat you with his jump shot, and that takes away from his off-the-dribble game. He would be a monster if he could really shoot it. ... Morris is very good offensively. He's got a nastiness to his game, which is a little Draymond Green-like. His trade demand adds another level of questions to the team. When someone goes public like that, you know it's even worse behind the scenes.

TELLING NUMBER

3

Players last season who matched **Eric Bledsoe's** stat line of 17.0 points, 6.1 assists and 5.2 rebounds per game: James Harden, LeBron James and Russell Westbrook.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH RICK CARLISLE

(8th season with Mavericks)

2014-15 RECORD 50-32

(4th in Southwest)

PG DERON WILLIAMS*

13.0 PPG; 6.6 APG; 38.7 FG%; 36.7 3FG%

SG WESLEY MATTHEWS*

15.9 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 44.8 FG%; 38.9 3FG%

SF CHANDLER PARSONS

15.7 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 46.2 FG%; 38.0 3FG%

PF DIRK NOWITZKI

17.3 PPG; 5.9 RPG; 45.9 FG%; 38.0 3FG%

C ZAZA PACHULIA*

8.3 PPG; 6.8 RPG; 1.1 SPG; 45.4 FG%

BENCH

PG DEVIN HARRIS

8.8 PPG; 3.1 APG; 41.8 FG%; 35.7 3FG%

SG J.J. BAREA

7.5 PPG; 3.4 APG; 42.0 FG%; 32.3 3FG%

SF JUSTIN ANDERSON (R)

12.2 PPG; 4.0 RPG; 46.6 FG%; 45.2 3FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

DALLAS Mavericks

MODEST PROPOSAL TAKE IT SLOW

WEST
9

As the Dirk Nowitzki era winds down in Dallas, there is no clear design for what comes next. The 37-year-old Nowitzki is signed through this season, and he has a player option for 2016-17. The closest thing the Mavericks have to a follow-up act is the wing duo of Wesley Matthews, 28, and Chandler Parsons, 26, who provide a nice blend of shooting, defense and playmaking.

The catch: Neither the 6' 5" Matthews nor the 6' 9" Parsons is fully healthy. Last March with the Trail Blazers, Matthews tore his left Achilles tendon—an injury historically debilitating to the career of an NBA player. Dallas signed him to a four-year, \$70 million contract just four months later. Parsons made his exit in April with a right-knee injury, followed by minor microfracture surgery. Both are young and committed to their rehabilitation, but Matthews won't be ready by opening night, and it's unlikely Parsons will, either.

And there should be no rush to bring them back—no matter how precious every one of Nowitzki's remaining games feels. Dallas has to mind the long term, especially given the financial commitment to Matthews and the leadership role Parsons has taken within the organization. There's only one real option for the Mavericks: Lean on 32-year-old journeyman Devin Harris and their first-round pick from Virginia, 6' 6" Justin Anderson, until Matthews and Parsons are completely healed.

—R.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Dallas

This team has a lot of parts, but it's hard to predict how they come together. If they have a good start, if they get with each other, they can be a 50-win team. But the center is going to be an issue, and they can just as easily be out of the playoffs.... Tyson Chandler [who signed with the Suns] was good for them last year; he did all the things as a big that **Dirk Nowitzki** doesn't do. They replaced him with backup players who have more faults than positives.... There's a reason the worst team in the league [the 76ers] didn't want **JaVale McGee**. **Sam Dalembert** is at the end of his career.

Zaza Pachulia clogs up the paint but doesn't have shot-blocking skills. None of them are outstanding rebounders.... Dirk is still pretty consistent. He gets you on his shot fake; he can get it on the post and shoot over you. I don't see his game slipping because he was never a great athlete to start with....

Wes Matthews is a great fit—if he's healthy—but [\$70 million for four years] is a lot to pay a guy coming off Achilles surgery. He goes hard and lives with a chip on his shoulder. He can shoot threes. He played with **Deron Williams** in Utah, so there is some familiarity there.... If I was buying shares, I would buy big on Deron. He's going back home, he's better in a small market, he's better without all the pressure. He has said that he wants the structure he had with Jerry Sloan. He will get it with **Rick Carlisle**.... Last year Rick went to what he calls his flow offense: free-form pick-and-roll, just play, attack your man. I think he'll go back to being more of a play caller, and they'll run a more rigid offense. Deron could thrive in that.

TELLING NUMBER

7

Seasons in which **Dirk Nowitzki** has made at least 100 three-pointers. (He had 104 last year.) In NBA history there have been only four other instances of a 7-footer making 100 threes.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH QUIN SNYDER

(2nd season with the Jazz)

2014-15 RECORD 38-44

(3rd in Northwest)

PG TREY BURKE

12.8 PPG; 4.3 APG; 36.8 FG%; 31.8 3FG%

SG ALEC BURKS

13.9 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 3.0 APG; 38.2 3FG%

SF GORDON HAYWARD

19.3 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 4.1 APG; 44.5 FG%

PF DERRICK FAVORS

16.0 PPG; 8.2 RPG; 1.7 BPG; 52.5 FG%

C RUDY GOBERT

8.4 PPG; 9.5 RPG; 2.3 BPG; 60.4 FG%

BENCH

SG RODNEY HOOD

8.7 PPG; 2.3 RPG; 41.4 FG%; 36.5 3FG%

PF TREVOR BOOKER

7.2 PPG; 5.0 RPG; 0.5 BPG; 48.7 FG%

SF ELIJAH MILLSAP

5.3 PPG; 3.2 RPG; 1.2 SPG; 34.0 FG%

UTAH
Jazz

MODEST PROPOSAL CONTINUE TO EXPERIMENT

WEST
10

A run of successful prospecting and player development has lifted the Jazz into playoff contention. The ascent of 7' 1" center Rudy Gobert after Enes Kanter's midseason departure crystallized the team's defense-first identity; the growing sophistication of Derrick Favors's game solidified the frontcourt; Gordon Hayward's improvement as a shot creator energized the offense; and young bench players boldly took advantage of their minutes to become reliable contributors.

Utah finished seventh in the NBA in net rating after the beginning of the new year and won 20 of its last 31 games, so big things are expected this season, and rightly so. But the Jazz's pursuit of their first postseason appearance since 2012 shouldn't come at the expense of their willingness to let growing players try new things—the formula that allowed the team to make a huge leap in 2014-15 under first-year coach Quin Snyder.

This is especially true at point guard. Second-year man Dante Exum is out indefinitely with a torn left ACL, and Utah doesn't have a single starting-caliber player on its roster to replace him. Trey Burke will get his chances, as will the recently added Raul Neto. Yet the Jazz should also try no-point-guard lineups that put the ball in the hands of wings like Hayward, Alec Burks, Rodney Hood or Joe Ingles. Snyder has a sharp, creative mind. He needs to keep pushing the boundaries, even as expectations heighten.

—R.M.



ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Utah

Quin Snyder took the defense that the Spurs use as a base—where they funnel everything into Tim Duncan—and funneled everything to **Rudy Gobert**. Gobert runs the floor with so few strides and blocks shots with his anticipation as well as his length. On offense he has great hands. You can mess up any pass, and he can still catch it and finish.... **Derrick Favors** still gets into foul trouble too much, but I've seen steady progress. His rebounding is consistent at both ends. He doesn't disappear; you don't see a lot of zero-point, six-rebound games out of him. He can be out there with a Blake Griffin and guard the drive, and he won't get bullied by guys like Zach Randolph.... **Trey Burke** had a decent rookie year [in 2013-14], then injuries, the coaching change, the style change—they all hurt him. Then they drafted a guy [**Dante Exum**, who will likely miss this season] over him at his position, and Burke went into a funk. He took some terrible shots.... **Gordon Hayward** is pretty good at creating shots. He has a high release, good size [6' 8"] and uses screens well. Quin encourages him to shoot threes, and that makes him even more of a weapon. Teams isolate him and go at him on defense, but he has underrated length. He benefits from Rudy being behind him.... They led the NBA in passes and have lots of ball movement, which is what **Rodney Hood** does well. He finds open spots and has three-point range. They're not going to put him in a lot of pick-and-rolls as a handler, but he can take his man one-on-one.... They really jelled in the second half last season. If they have that same effort this season, they'll be fighting for a playoff spot.

TELLING NUMBER

184

Shooting fouls drawn by **Gordon Hayward** last season—a 33.3% increase over 2013-14. Hayward's improved ability to break down defenses off the dribble and draw contact helped him lift his scoring average from 16.2 to 19.3 points.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH **GEORGE KARL**

(2nd season with Kings)

2014-15 RECORD **29-53**

(4th in Pacific)

PG **RAJON RONDO***

8.9 PPG; 7.9 APG; 1.3 SPG; 42.6 FG%

SG **BEN MCLEMORE**

12.1 PPG; 2.9 RPG; 43.7 FG%; 35.8 3FG%

SF **RUDY GAY**

21.1 PPG; 5.9 RPG; 45.5 FG%; 35.9 3FG%

PF **DEMARCUS COUSINS**

24.1 PPG; 12.7 RPG; 3.6 APG; 46.7 FG%

C **KOSTA KOUFOS***

5.2 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 50.8 FG%

BENCH

PG **DARREN COLLISON**

16.1 PPG; 5.6 APG; 47.3 FG%; 37.3 3FG%

SG **MARCO BELINELLI***

9.2 PPG; 1.5 APG; 42.3 FG%; 37.4 3FG%

SF **OMRI CASSPI**

8.9 PPG; 3.9 RPG; 1.5 APG; 48.9 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

SACRAMENTO
Kings

MODEST PROPOSAL

DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE LOW-KEY VET

WEST
11

In an organization full of squeaky wheels, mild-mannered Darren Collison is content to let his play do the talking. That's generally a smart approach, especially when acclimating to a new coach, but it has left the 28-year-old point guard as one of the league's most overlooked players.

The popular narrative of Sacramento's 2014-15 season was that a promising start gave way to chaos when DeMarcus Cousins missed three weeks with viral meningitis. That's true, but it overlooks Collison's absence, which made a worsening situation unsalvageable. Before undergoing season-ending right-hip surgery in February, Collison was averaging a career-high 16.1 points, and his +1.2 net rating led the Kings' rotation players. More important, they had a +8.1 net rating when Collison and Cousins shared the court.

Rather than trust those promising flashes, new GM Vlade Divac signed Rajon Rondo this summer, a move that bumped Collison to the bench. While Collison lacks Rondo's credentials, which include four All-Star selections and a championship ring, he's a more natural fit for George Karl's up-tempo style. The son of two world-class sprinters, Collison is a hare to Rondo's tortoise, and he possesses far superior outside shooting to balance the court for Cousins and forward Rudy Gay.

Karl's stated goal this season is to reach .500, something Sacramento hasn't done since 2005-06. That's lofty talk, and the Kings will only deliver on that if they can find regular sources of help for Cousins. Their search should begin under the radar.

—B.G.



TELLING NUMBER

39.7

Free throw percentage last year of 6' 1" **Rajon Rondo**, the lowest ever for a player under 6' 6" with at least 75 attempts.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Sacramento

They spent a lot of money and got better talentwise. The off-season story lines are a big deal—the shake-ups and coaching changes and all of that—but I don't think these guys will be rolling over. They might go down, but it will take a fight.... Their best player is **DeMarcus Cousins**. Why did they use a lottery pick on a center in **Willie Cauley-Stein** and then sign another center in **Kosta Koufos**? Especially when **George Karl** likes to play fast?... Cousins might be the most talented center in the NBA. He can beat you by himself some nights. His decision-making with the ball keeps improving, but the body language, the emotional control are still huge question marks. Cousins is best as a back-to-the-basket guy, not in this run-and-gun style that Karl likes.... I'm not sure **Rajon Rondo** will want to play Karl's style either. And that makes for a big challenge. Because if your point guard and your best player want to play slower and your coach wants it to be faster, that's a fight waiting to happen.... They should think about lineups that get as much shooting on the court at the same time as possible. Can you play **Ben McLemore**, **Marco Belinelli** and **Seth Curry** together with Cousins? That would create a lot of room in the paint.... Belinelli is going to be dealing with culture shock, coming from San Antonio. He's not used to any ball stoppers, and he's always expecting people to make the right pass.... Maybe they thought Cauley-Stein was the best player on the board [at No. 6]. Or maybe he's insurance in case something happens with Cousins. There's a little Joakim Noah to Cauley-Stein's game.



**BOOGIE
WONDERLAND**

Cousins joined Oscar Robertson as the only players in franchise history to average at least 24 points and 12 boards.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH FLIP SAUNDERS

(2nd season with Timberwolves)

2014-15 RECORD 16-66

(5th in Northwest)

PG RICKY RUBIO

10.3 PPG; 8.8 APG; 5.7 RPG; 35.6 FG%

SG ZACH LAVINE

10.1 PPG; 3.6 APG; 42.2 FG%; 34.1 3FG%

SF ANDREW WIGGINS

16.9 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 43.7 FG%; 31.0 3FG%

PF KEVIN GARNETT

6.9 PPG; 6.6 RPG; 1.6 APG; 46.1 FG%

C KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS (R)

10.3 PPG; 6.7 RPG; 2.3 BPG; 56.6 FG%

BENCH

SG KEVIN MARTIN

20.0 PPG; 3.6 RPG; 42.7 FG%; 39.3 3FG%

PG ANDRE MILLER*

4.4 PPG; 3.5 APG; 1.9 RPG; 50.0 FG%

C NIKOLA PEKOVIC

12.5 PPG; 7.5 RPG; 0.9 APG; 42.4 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

The Minnesota Timberwolves logo is displayed in a large, bold, black font. The word "MINNESOTA" is in a smaller, red font above "Timberwolves". The letter "T" is particularly large and stylized, with the "i" and "m" integrated into its structure. The "wolves" part is in a standard black font.

MODEST PROPOSAL

LET THE YOUNG BIG MAN STRETCH

WEST
12

With the first pick in the 2015 draft, the Timberwolves selected a multitalented big man from Kentucky well-suited for the modern NBA. Then, in his first action as a pro, at the Las Vegas Summer League, they proceeded to use him almost exclusively as a low-post throwback.

At 6' 11" and 244 pounds, Karl-Anthony Towns has the touch and size to work from that space. He also has the ball skills, mobility and vision to operate from so many others. A prodigious talent like the 19-year-old Towns should be allowed to expand his game in many directions at once, particularly while taking the floor for a young team still looking for its identity. Variety is key; a curtailed role may promote healthy growth in most young players, but over-restricting Towns only does him a developmental disservice.

While it makes some sense to post up Towns on possession after possession when he's flanked by summer leaguers, in Minnesota he will have a far better collection of passers (Ricky Rubio and Kevin Garnett) and scorers (Andrew Wiggins and Kevin Martin) around him. He could be brought to the elbow and taught to perfect the dribble hand-off. His midrange shooting could clear room for Minnesota's interior play. Putting Towns in more pick-and-roll scenarios could take better advantage of both his vision and range. There's a time and a place for Towns to work inside, but his career—and the Wolves' long-term prospects—bank on the breadth of his all-around game.

—R.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Minnesota

If **Kevin Garnett** plays 50 games, I'll be shocked. He'll probably start the halves, but [at 39] he can't stay out there for more than 20 minutes anymore.... Having KG there is the best positive for a young guy who wants to be great. You can either let him intimidate you or you can try to match his work ethic and his intensity.

Karl-Anthony Towns's intensity turned on and off at Kentucky. KG will push him. Towns has to embrace it....

Ricky Rubio is a question mark every year. What is he going to give you, what's his health like? There is always something with him. He's an exciting player with great vision, and when he plays with **Andrew Wiggins**, they can look really good. But Rubio has to improve that shot, because right now there is no reason to defend him.... Wiggins had to get better every day last season. They had no one else who could score. They ran the offense to him and through him. He figured out where he could get shots in the flow. He became efficient. For as much pressure that was on him, he was their most reliable player....

Shabazz Muhammad's body looked better last year. He had some explosion, which he didn't have as a rookie. He was willing to go into the post and wasn't settling for jump shots.... **Zach LaVine** has to get past "I'm Zach LaVine, YouTube sensation."

He has to be a grinder. He took some horrendous shots last year. With his athleticism he needs to get to the line more than twice a game.... **Nikola Pekovic** is fun to watch. He initiates contact. He plays under the rim. Nobody will mess with him.

TELLING NUMBER

2,969

Minutes played by **Andrew Wiggins** last year.

The Rookie of the Year trailed James Harden for the NBA lead by 12 minutes. Only Wilt Chamberlain, Elvin Hayes and Damian Lillard led the league as first-year players.

PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH MIKE MALONE

(1st season with Nuggets)

2014-15 RECORD 30-52

(4th in Northwest)

PG EMMANUEL MUDIAY (R)

18.0 PPG; 5.9 APG; 6.3 RPG; 1.6 SPG

SG RANDY FOYE

8.7 PPG; 2.4 APG; 36.8 FG%; 35.7 3FG%

SF WILSON CHANDLER

13.9 PPG; 6.1 RPG; 42.9 FG%; 34.2 3FG%

PF KENNETH FARIED

12.6 PPG; 8.9 RPG; 1.2 APG; 50.7 FG%

C JUSUF NURKIC

6.9 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 1.1 BPG; 44.6 FG%

BENCH

SF DANILO GALLINARI

12.4 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 40.1 FG%; 35.5 3FG%

PG JAMEER NELSON

8.3 PPG; 4.0 APG; 40.7 FG%; 34.5 3FG%

PF J.J. HICKSON

7.6 PPG; 6.3 RPG; 0.5 BPG; 47.5 FG%

(R) ROOKIE, CHINA STATS

DENVER Nuggets

MODEST PROPOSAL

GIVE THE KEYS TO THE 19-YEAR-OLD

WEST
13

New coach Mike Malone knows the kind of team he'd like to oversee, and GM Tim Connelly has ideas for how his roster might one day look. Those visions collide at Emmanuel Mudiay, the No. 7 pick in the 2015 draft. Mudiay is undoubtedly at the center of what the Nuggets are trying to build as an organization, but he is also likely not yet the type of point guard that Malone seems to prefer.

The minutes at point guard should be free and clear for the 6' 5", 200-pound Mudiay from Day One; his closest competition is 33-year-old Jameer Nelson. The operational freedom, on the other hand, might not come so readily. Malone is a coach who favors structure, and rookie point guards don't tend to be reliable. After appearing in just 12 games in his one season playing professionally in China (where he signed out of high school rather than play in college), Mudiay will be no different. In some games he'll play like a prodigy; in others he'll waffle between doing too much and too little.

Denver has to see Mudiay through that teetering dynamic as he develops a workable balance. He has quick feet and blistering speed, and he sees the floor like a veteran. Already he seems equipped to read and attack in a way that would keep the Nuggets' offense fresh and opposing defenders on their heels. Giving him room to make decisions—and mistakes—will accelerate their steep climb back to Western Conference relevance.

—R.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Denver

In Sacramento, **Mike Malone** had to play slow; DeMarcus Cousins was always the last one down the floor. But he can coach up-tempo, which is the style that fits most of this roster. The key for him will be to keep the turnovers down. He is not like [former longtime coach] George Karl; he cannot let turnovers just fall off his back. ... **Emmanuel Mudiay** has the best vision of a point guard coming out of the draft in the last few years. He has a lot of passing tools others don't have. The big deal for him will be to play without trying to prove he can shoot. His shot isn't broken, but right now it's his biggest weakness. ...

Kenneth Faried is a great offensive rebounder and a good defensive rebounder, but he can be a bit of a diva at times. He is a great runner, but he has to play a fast style. He is a limited scorer outside 10 feet. A guy like Mudiay can deliver the ball to him in pick-and-roll because he is committed to rolling. ... **Wilson Chandler's** numbers have been consistent the past few seasons, but his night-in, night-out efforts are inconsistent. ... **Danilo Gallinari** is important. He is a big guy who can space the floor. The [left] ACL injury took away some of his first step, but he still does a good job selling his shot fake. I don't want Gallo playing the three; his defensive liabilities come into play. He's a face-up four. The problem is, that screws up the rest of their rotation. ... **Jusuf Nurkic** wants to create physical play. He checked out a little bit at the end of the year. If he had a consistent focus, he could be really good affecting shots, taking away post-ups.

TELLING NUMBER

5.8

Assists per game for rookie **Emmanuel Mudiay** in the Las Vegas Summer League, which ranked fourth. He also averaged 5.0 turnovers (tied for second most), including seven—and just one dime—in his last game.



PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH BYRON SCOTT

(2nd season with Lakers)

2014-15 RECORD 21-61

(5th in Pacific)

PG D'ANGELO RUSSELL (R)

19.3 PPG; 5.0 APG; 5.7 RPG; 44.9 FG%

SG JORDAN CLARKSON

11.9 PPG; 3.2 RPG; 44.8 FG%; 31.4 3FG%

SF KOBE BRYANT

22.3 PPG; 5.7 RPG; 37.3 FG%; 29.3 3FG%

PF JULIUS RANDLE*

15.0 PPG; 10.4 RPG; 1.4 APG; 50.0 FG%

C ROY HIBBERT*

10.6 PPG; 7.1 RPG; 1.6 BPG; 44.6 FG%

BENCH

SF NICK YOUNG

13.4 PPG; 2.3 RPG; 36.6 FG%; 36.9 3FG%

SG LOU WILLIAMS*

15.5 PPG; 2.1 APG; 40.4 FG%; 34.0 3FG%

PF BRANDON BASS*

10.6 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 1.3 APG; 50.4 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS *2013-14 COLLEGE STATS

Lakers

MODEST PROPOSAL LIGHTEN KOBE'S LOAD

WEST
14

Three consecutive season-ending injuries have forced the Lakers to admit the truth: Thirty-seven-year-old Kobe Bryant's engine light is on, his brakes are squealing, and there's smoke coming from the hood. Coach Byron Scott broke from his usual hard-charging script before the preseason started, wisely suggesting that he would take better care to manage Bryant's minutes.

Last season, as Bryant passed Michael Jordan for third on the all-time scoring list, he averaged 34.5 minutes, far more than other aging stars such as Tim Duncan (28.9) and Kevin Garnett (20.3). Not only did Kobe break down with a torn right rotator cuff after 35 games, but his 37.3% shooting was also the worst by any player who has averaged at least 20 shots during the three-point era. The knee-jerk response in Los Angeles has been that Bryant has no choice but to shoulder a huge burden because of his weak supporting cast. The numbers disagree: The Lakers' offense operated at a slightly higher efficiency without him in 2014-15, and their team defense performed significantly better. This late-career dip in effectiveness shouldn't be surprising: Kobe has logged 46,774 regular-season minutes, compared with 35,887 for Jordan at the same age.

Moderating Bryant's usage will also enable L.A.'s recent lottery picks—point guard D'Angelo Russell and power forward Julius Randle—to feel like core pieces rather than mere supporting actors. While Bryant and Lakers fans might find fewer minutes hard to accept, it's the only option. Who wants to see him hobble into the sunset on crutches? —B.G.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Los Angeles

They're still going to be really, really bad. I don't see **Roy Hibbert, Brandon Bass** and **Lou Williams** as game-changers. The Lakers are in an identity crisis.... Their focus should be on their young guys. That means **D'Angelo Russell, Julius Randle** and **Jordan Clarkson** are the priorities. I'm worried that **Byron Scott** will ride the veterans instead and it goes down as a lost year. Scott has a lot of loyalty to **Kobe Bryant** and the organization.... Kobe's presence and knack for scoring and the attention he draws still make him a plus player, even if his stats have fallen off a bit. Nobody else on that roster strikes fear in your heart.... My main question with Russell is whether he can make decisions at this level. There's a big difference between being a good highlight passer and really running an entire offense. You need to know the playbook and understand when to involve your big guys, when to step forward yourself.... Williams only makes their picture cloudier. He's good enough to take minutes from Clarkson, and that harms the long term while not adding a ton in the short term.... Randle is the biggest question. People saw a lefty who has a knack for scoring on the block, and they wanted to call him Zach Randolph. But Randle hasn't done anything yet to say he's headed in that direction. There's some real bust potential. He needs to become a good scorer in isolation because he can't shoot three-pointers or make plays for others, and he's not a defensive lockdown guy.... I don't see a single plus defender on the roster besides Hibbert.

TELLING NUMBER

14

Minutes played by rookie

Julius Randle on opening night before breaking his right leg. That set the tone for an injury-filled 2014-15: No Laker started more than 59 games.



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PROJECTED LINEUP

2014-15 stats

COACH TERRY STOTTS

(4th season with Trail Blazers)

2014-15 RECORD 51-31

(1st in Northwest)

PG DAMIAN LILLARD

21.0 PPG; 6.2 APG; 43.4 FG%; 34.3 3FG%

SG GERALD HENDERSON*

12.1 PPG; 3.4 RPG; 43.7 FG%; 33.1 3FG%

SF AL-FAROUQ AMINU*

5.6 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 41.2 FG%; 27.4 3FG%

PF MEYERS LEONARD

5.9 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 51.0 FG%; 42.0 3FG%

C MASON PLUMLEE*

8.7 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 57.3 FG%

BENCH

SG C.J. MCCOLLUM

6.8 PPG; 1.5 RPG; 43.6 FG%; 39.6 3FG%

PF ED DAVIS*

8.3 PPG; 7.6 RPG; 1.2 APG; 60.1 FG%

SF MAURICE HARKLESS*

3.5 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 0.7 SPG; 39.9 FG%

*NEW ACQUISITION

PORTLAND Trail Blazers

MODEST PROPOSAL

DEDICATE TIME TO LITTLE-USED PROSPECTS

WEST
15

Portland's roster bears little resemblance to the one it had at the start of last season: Its average age is 23.9 (down from 26.3), its payroll is a league-low \$50.3 million (down from \$72.9 million) and its chances of a playoff appearance are highly unlikely (down from almost definite). Damian Lillard remains a centerpiece, while previous backups C.J. McCollum, Meyers Leonard and Allen Crabbe will have to assume bigger roles.

Among the new acquisitions are a pair of young forwards who combined for less than 1,000 minutes in 2014-15 and should now get all the time they need to establish themselves—or not. Power forward Noah Vonleh is only 20, one year removed from being the No. 9 pick out of Indiana. He was obviously a project, but the Hornets bailed on that process after a single season of gentle usage. The 6' 10", 240-pound Vonleh has the touch and coordination to build a promising game. The rawness of his skill set is offset by tantalizing flashes of shooting and mobility.

At 22, 6' 9" small forward Maurice Harkless is entering his fourth NBA season. While he shot the ball well for the Magic in 2013-14 (46.4% from the floor, 38.3% from three), he saw his minutes slashed by 65% last year. Harkless was the victim of a crowd of young wings in Orlando, undone because he isn't yet much of an offensive player. That could change with time, but only if Harkless has the practical experience necessary to grow his game. By giving Vonleh and Harkless significant minutes, coach Terry Stotts can find out if they're part of the Trail Blazers' future. —R.M.

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up Portland

This is a full-scale rebuild. Four starters are gone, and they signed or traded for backups to replace them.... **Damian Lillard** is the man now. You can't go under on pick-and-rolls with him; he can shoot it from anywhere behind a pick. For a guy who is an All-Star, he gets knocked to the floor a lot and doesn't get calls. He's an O.K. defender. He's a little lazy at times. He reaches and gambles for steals. He is going to have to be patient with a young group.... I thought **Noah Vonleh** had a pretty good summer. During his workouts before the draft [two years ago] he was trying to convince everyone he could play small forward. He has to get over that. He's a less athletic version of Blake Griffin.... I thought they did well in the Nicolas Batum deal. They got Vonleh and a starting wing player [from Charlotte] in **Gerald Henderson**. Henderson is great off screens, he's a good midrange shooter, a good energy guy and a good guy. He can be better with a change of scenery.... **Mason Plumlee** is a rim-runner, a shot blocker and a pretty good offensive rebounder. I don't know how much more he can be, though.... If **C.J. McCollum** plays like he did in the playoffs, he can take a bigger share of the minutes.... **Al-Farouq Aminu** teases you. He is a good corner three-point shooter, and a good defender who can defend both the three and a face-up four. But if he's my starting three, that's kind of weak.... **Meyers Leonard** fouls, he's an inconsistent rebounder, and he takes crazy shots. He didn't show anything until he started making threes last year. His three-point shot is ugly, but it's been going in—it's Manute Bol-like.

TELLING NUMBER

52.1

Percentage of points scored by players returning to Portland that came from point guard **Damian Lillard**, who poured in 1,720 points. The five other Blazers coming back scored just 1,580.

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GAME CHANGER

FORTY YEARS LATER, CARLTON FISK'S WALK-OFF HOME RUN IN THE 1975 WORLD SERIES STILL RESONATES AS LOUDLY AS THE CHURCH BELLS THAT RANG ACROSS NEW ENGLAND THAT NIGHT. IT'S THE SIGNATURE MOMENT OF PERHAPS THE GREATEST FALL CLASSIC—AND OF A BROADCAST THAT FOREVER CHANGED THE WAY WE EXPERIENCE SPORTS ON TV

BY TOM VERDUCCI

Photograph by
Harry Cabluck
AP





**MOMENT OF
IMPACT**

According to *TV Guide*,
Fisk's 12th-inning
heroics in Game 6—and
NBC's groundbreaking
production—is the
apex of sports
television.



“WHAT THE '58 NFL TITLE GAME

A WANING GIBBOUS MOON hung like a medallion over Charlestown, N.H., on the first clear night after a three-day nor'easter. A light wind rustled the lindens and oaks along Main Street. The bells of St. Luke's Episcopal Church suddenly began clanging at the strange hour of 1:07 a.m. Such an intrusion on the dead of night alarmed the local police. No services could possibly be held in these first hours of Wednesday, Oct. 22, 1975.

The corner of Main and Church, whence the bells tolled, is 128 miles from Fenway Park, 170 miles from Coopers-town, N.Y., and as near to the roots of America as anyplace else—which is to say its story actually begins in England. A struggling young cabinetmaker named Richard Upjohn left that country for the U.S. and an architectural career around 1829. His big break came 10 years later, when he was hired to design and build a new Trinity Church in New York City. He delivered what still stands as one of this country's foremost monuments to Gothic architecture.

Upjohn became an American master of the Gothic Revival style and gained wide influence for his 1852 publication *Rural Architecture*, which provided the designs for small congregations to build churches all over the country. St. Luke's, built over five months in 1863, is Upjohn's only wooden church in New Hampshire: a simple, sturdy, white building shaped like a cross, with pointed arched red doorways; a slate-shingled, steeply pitched roof; and a two-story tower with almond-shaped louvered openings on four sides, the better to allow the bells' ringing to carry over the Connecticut River Valley.

Those bells. They would not stop. By Godfrey if any of the 4,300 residents of Charlestown could sleep through that racket. A police officer rushed to the church and climbed to the belfry. There he found a Charlestown resident, David Conant, 61.

"What are you doing?" the officer demanded.

"Carlton Fisk just hit a home run to win the World Series game tonight for the Red Sox!" Conant announced.

Fisk was born across the river in Bellows Falls, Vt., and raised in Charlestown. Conant's wife used to change Fisk's diapers. Conant's son played baseball with Fisk at Charles-

town High. The broad-shouldered, square-jawed Fisk was as much a testament to New England values as St. Luke's itself. As he once told the *Concord Monitor*, "My core was anchored in New Hampshire. Being stubborn and unwavering, never giving in, never giving up, no matter what the obstacles."

Everybody in Charlestown knew Fisk, the kid who was called Pudge ever since he weighed 105 pounds as an eight-year-old. Now the police officer understood what all the commotion was about. "Hell," he replied, "if I had known that, I would have come and helped you."

Conant rang the bells for four minutes. Quiet finally returned to Charlestown at 1:11 a.m., but the resonance of the bells of St. Luke's will never cease.

That night endures not just because a son of New England hit one of the most famous home runs in baseball history, the clout that ended Game 6 and made necessary an almost-as-thrilling Game 7 to confirm a superlative Reds ball club as world champions. That night also changed American culture.

Forty years later our arenas and ballparks and especially our living rooms, dens, man caves, bars, restaurants and every other place we gather to watch sports have become our secular versions of St. Luke's. *Worship* is not too strong a word to describe what we do at the nexus of our two favorite pastimes: sports and television.

Think about what we now take for granted in televised sports. Prime-time starts, the networks influencing when games are played, cameras placed at unusual vantage points, reaction shots of athletes away from the ball—all of it can be traced to the NBC telecast of Game 6 of the 1975 World Series. What the 1958 NFL title game did for pro football, Game 6 did for televised sports. There is only before and after. It is the most influential telecast in the 76 years that baseball has been televised.

"The sixth game was one of the best ever played," William Leggett wrote in *SI* then, "and NBC rose to the occasion with perhaps the best baseball telecast ever put on the air."

In hindsight, it was easier to build St. Luke's than it was to make that four-hour event. It took much more than Fisk's home run to change televised sports forever. It took the conflation of happy accidents and huge per-



1975 WORLD SERIES



DID FOR FOOTBALL, GAME 6 DID FOR TELEVISED SPORTS.”

sonalities, including rain, money, Bowie Kuhn, Red Smith, Howard Cosell, rain, O.J. Simpson, Pete Rose, Sparky Anderson . . . and more rain. Oh, did it rain.

■ **A TELEGRAM** arrived at the Lenox Hotel on Boylston Street in Boston during the last week of the 1975 regular season. It was addressed to a guest, Dick Stockton, a 32-year-old broadcaster who was wrapping up his first season calling play-by-play for the Red Sox. Stockton's timing was superb. The Red Sox won 95 games, their most since 1949.

The telegram was a bonus for the rookie announcer. Stockton, who only 12 months earlier had been a freelancer for a Boston NBC station with no baseball experience, ripped open the envelope. He hardly could believe the type-written words:

We are pleased to advise you of your nomination and approval to work with us during the 1975 World Series for the telecast of the first and sixth game. \$500 a game. Please do not include the color blue in your wardrobe. Good luck. Chet Simmons, NBC Sports.

Today the telegram is framed and hanging on the wall of Stockton's Florida home.

■ **GAME 6**, which followed a travel day, was scheduled for Saturday afternoon, Oct. 18. The Reds were one victory away from the franchise's first championship in 35 years. But they would have to wait at least another day. The nor'easter that had brought sheets of rain to Boston on Friday night showed no signs of quitting. At 9:20 a.m. Kuhn, the commissioner, called the game and rescheduled it for the following day at 1 p.m.

REACTION TIME

The camera in Fenway's famous leftfield wall was put there to catch close plays at second base, but instead it helped NBC set the standard for how TV could capture the raw emotion of sports.



The newspapermen, who had grown up with the World Series starting a few days after the regular season (with no playoffs as a preamble) and played exclusively in daylight (the better for deadlines), blamed the postponement on television. "The whole competition could have been completed before now and that championship decided in lovely weather if baseball hadn't sold out its prime spectacle as a weekend special for the TV hucksters," wrote Smith, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *The New York Times* who was born in 1905, the year of the second World Series.

The forecast for Sunday sounded no better, which sent the press corps into a tizzy about whether Kuhn would dare play Game 6 on a Monday night. Baseball had played its first World Series night game in 1971, then dipped a few

other toes in the water over the next four years by scheduling the three weekday games (3, 4 and 5) at night. Game 6 had never been played at night. "It all boils down to the fact that baseball stupidly puts the interests of the networks and their viewers ahead of the cash customers' good," Smith wrote.

But Kuhn's choice wasn't so simple. By playing Game 6 on Monday night, he would be putting baseball up against not only *Monday Night Football*, in which Simpson's Buffalo Bills were playing the New York Giants, but also the top-rated show on television, the sitcom *All in the Family*, which was pulling in a staggering 30.1 rating at a time when viewers still had few choices beyond ABC, CBS and NBC. (Only 14% of homes had cable television.) "Relish is the wrong word," Kuhn replied when a reporter asked if he relished such a head-to-head-to-head matchup.

Many houses had just one television, and the networks packed prime time with shows designed to allow the entire family to gather around the TV set after dinner. Eight o'clock was reserved almost exclusively for dramas and sitcoms. Sports had no footing in network television at 8 p.m.; the networks and advertisers were skeptical that sports could work at that hour because, while they might appeal to dad, they would not win the whole family's attention. ABC had been running *Monday Night Football* since 1970, but those games had 9 p.m. kickoffs, past the "family window" coveted by advertisers.

Baseball tried its own Monday-night games in the early 1970s, but the reaction from viewers was so tepid that in '73, NBC announced that it would recruit celebrity game analysts such as Pearl Bailey, Woody Allen and Dinah Shore. One celebrity invited to join the NBC booth that season was *MNF* fixture Cosell, who promptly ripped baseball. "Unfortunately," he said on air, "it is impossible for us to continue to camouflage the indisputable fact that this game is lagging insufferably."

Baseball was regarded as too slow. A downturn in offense, which prompted the American League to adopt the designated hitter rule in 1973, didn't help. Attendance was stagnant: Seven of the 24 teams failed to draw one million fans (fewer than 12,000 per game). Ratings for the 1974 World Series were down 20%. The flow of national TV money showed little to no growth. In May 1971, Kuhn announced a four-year contract with NBC that included a 7.6% increase in annual payments, but the take for each club actually *declined* because the majors had expanded from 20 to 24 teams.

Four years later, in March 1975, Kuhn announced that ABC would join NBC in a new deal with MLB. He proudly trumpeted a 29.3% increase in total fees as "enormous." But because of inflation, the true value of the deal was about equal to the 1971 deal. The big TV money the old pressmen like Smith worried about wasn't there—not yet, anyway.

■ NO PERSON created more institutional baseball memories than Harry Coyle. He directed 36 World Series, all for NBC, beginning with the first the network covered, in 1947. It was through Coyle's direction that we saw, even if it was many years later, Lavagetto break Bevens's heart in '47, Mays rob Wertz in '54, Berra jump into Larsen's arms in '56, the ball go through Buckner's legs in '86, Gibson take Eckersley deep in '88. Coyle gave us the visual encyclopedia of postseason baseball.

It was Coyle who pioneered the use of the centerfield camera, capturing the strategic embroilment of pitcher-batter-catcher. Coyle also wrote a 14-page manual for televising baseball that was such a definitive work that it was called Harry's Bible. It included each camera operator's assignment

“COYLE'S MANUAL FOR T

STARRING ROLES

The TV-friendly Kuhn shook hands with Fisk before Game 1 (below); when the Series ended, the careers of (opposite, from left) Stockton, Kubek (with Fisk), Coyle and Garagiola were indelibly changed.



on the most common plays and the rapid progression of how those shots should be used.

Coyle, a former World War II bomber pilot, was 53 in 1975. He was a cigarette-smoking, gruff-talking, *dese 'n' dems* kind of guy who walked in the swaying manner of John Wayne and was known to relieve himself between the production trucks during commercial breaks. Such a legend did he become that the broadcaster played by Bob Uecker in the 1989 baseball farce *Major League* was named Harry Coyle.

On the night of Oct. 21, 1975, in a parking lot behind the rightfield seats of Fenway Park, a young production assistant named Michael Weisman would take his seat in NBC's main production truck, immediately behind Coyle. It was Weisman's job to run the graphics, such as flashing the ball-and-strike count. "I thought, Oh, my God, I remember being 10 years

old and watching Tony Kubek get hit in the throat, and this is the man who brought me the pictures," Weisman says of Coyle. "This is the man who brought Koufax into my house in '63 and the Miracle Mets in '69. It's very rare you could work with someone who was the best in history at what he did.

"I don't know how he did it. For all those years he was under such intense pressure. Every pitch could lead to history, and you can't miss one."

■ SUNDAY ARRIVED. So did more rain. Kuhn called the game at 9:23 a.m. Then he announced a game time for Monday: 8:30 p.m. "My inclination is toward a night game to better accommodate the fans," Kuhn said.

Smith was apoplectic. He eviscerated Kuhn in print again. "Exposing cash customers to raw night cold is a novel way of accommodating them," Smith wrote. "Accommodating TV sponsors at prime time is something else again." The two days of rain had done more than just postpone the World



1975 WORLD SERIES



TELEVISION BASEBALL WAS CALLED HARRY'S BIBLE. ”

Series; they made for a new war, between the purists who wanted to protect the agrarian-rooted game they had grown up with and the profiteers of a foundering sport who saw TV money as the way forward.

The Monday-night ratings war would never happen, though. Monday morning brought only more rain and more carping. Another *Times* columnist, Dave Anderson, took the baton from Smith later in the week. “Nureyev isn’t asked to dance on ice, Heifetz never had to play the violin with mittens,” Anderson wrote. “But for the greater glory of the Nielsen ratings, World Series players are expected to compete in weather that not only is unsuitable to their skills but also would not always be condoned during the regular season.”

Kuhn finally rescheduled the game for Tuesday at 8:30 p.m. The World Series had been on hiatus for four days. Bitterness and fatigue saturated the press corps as surely as the rain did. “The mood by then,” Stockton says, “was, Let’s get this thing over with.”

■ **TONY KUBEK**, the former Yankees shortstop who quickly became the sharpest baseball analyst on television, would walk around a ballpark before a World Series in the manner of a nature photographer studying the landscape. Instead of a camera, he would carry a yellow legal pad and a pen. Accompanied by executive producer Scotty Connal, Kubek would look for camera sight lines that might offer a unique perspective on the upcoming games. In 1974 at Dodger Stadium, for instance, Kubek suggested that NBC place a camera in the field boxes behind first base with a direct view of the pitcher, shooting through the open space between the first baseman and the runner taking a lead. Kubek knew that the A’s carried a pinch-running specialist, Herb Washington. In the ninth inning of Game 2, with Oakland down a run, Washington pinch-ran at first base. Sure enough, Dodgers pitcher Mike Marshall picked him off.

A year later Kubek and Connal were walking the perimeter of Fenway Park when Kubek began jotting on his yellow legal pad. “Scotty, with Rose and Morgan and Griffey and Concepcion, the Reds like to run,” Kubek said. “What if we had a camera in the leftfield wall looking in at second base? We might get some hard takeouts, some steals and slides, a lot of unusual things.”

Connal was intrigued. Kubek, Connal, Coyle and Chet Simmons, an NBC Sports executive, walked across leftfield to the Green Monster and were happy to see there was a rectangular opening in the wall, similar to the vision slit in a tank, so the scoreboard operators could watch the game. They decided it would be a perfect place to put a camera.

■ **A BEAUTIFUL DAWN** broke over Boston on Tuesday, Oct. 21. The forecast called for a partly sunny sky and a high temperature near 70°, dropping into the high 50s at night. Baseball weather. Finally.

John Kiley headed to Fenway Park to play his Hammond X-66 organ, a 574-pound monster made of mahogany and ebony that retailed for \$9,800. Kiley was 11 days away from turning 63, which is to say he was six months younger than Fenway Park. When he was 15, Kiley began playing the organ at the Criterion Theatre in Roxbury, Mass., providing the score to the silent movies. It was clear that the boy had a gift for matching music to the moment. He played other movie houses around Boston until he landed a job in 1934 as the musical director of WMEX, a job he held until 1956. Then one day a regular listener called and offered him a job. The listener was Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey, who hired Kiley to bring his music to Fenway.

In the middle of the seventh inning of Game 6, Kiley would pound out “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” on his X-66. The song was not yet a staple of major league ballparks. That tradition would take full root the next season, when White Sox broadcaster Harry Caray led fans at Comiskey Park in singing the tune.

■ **SIMMONS HAD** come up with a rotation for his World Series broadcast booth that resembled how Anderson, the Reds manager known as Captain Hook, treated his pitching staff. Those taking turns at the microphones were NBC play-by-play men Curt Gowdy, 56, and Joe Garagiola, 49; Kubek, 40; and local announcers Stockton and Ned Martin, 52, of Boston and Marty Brennaman, 33, of Cincinnati.

Stockton made his baseball national television debut in Game 1. Part of his job was to read promotional copy for a show that was scheduled to debut that night: *Saturday Night Live*. Stockton shared the booth with Kubek and Gowdy, the legendary broadcaster who once called the Super Bowl, World Series and Final Four in the same year. Gowdy and Stockton



“STOCKTON SAYS HIS PERFECTLY UNDERSTATED CALL

each did 4½ innings of play-by-play, with Gowdy leading off. As Gowdy turned over the duties to Stockton in the bottom of the fifth, he told viewers, “You’ll enjoy listening to Dick.”

Recalled Stockton, “Tell me which network top play-by-play announcer today would go along with this. Are you kidding me? He made me feel so at home. I’ll never forget what he did.”

Gowdy, though, would be pushed out by Garagiola as NBC’s lead play-by-play man the next season. Garagiola had done well as a 1975 *Saturday Game of the Week* guest analyst. It helped, too, that he was a spokesman for Chrysler, a major baseball sponsor that wanted its man to play a big role in the network’s baseball coverage.

Game 6 was Stockton’s only other World Series TV assignment. This time he would be working with Garagiola and Kubek, the color man. Stockton would do play-by-play for the first 4½ innings, beginning with the first pitch thrown by Boston starter Luis Tiant. With a possible Reds clincher on tap, NBC wanted Garagiola in place to call the last out of the World Series.

Shortly before the game, in the press dining room, Stockton ran into Peter Gammons of *The Boston Globe*. Gammons introduced him to a young *Globe* reporter: “Dick, this is Lesley Visser.” It wasn’t long before the urbane Stockton asked her out to dinner. Visser said yes and gave him her phone number.

It would be a bell ringer of a night for Stockton as much as for Fisk. Stockton would become an uncle that night, to a boy born to his sister during the game. He would make the broadcasting call of his life. And he met his future wife. (He and Visser married in 1983 and divorced in 2010.) After the Series, Stockton took Visser to a Hungarian restaurant in Boston. Someone mentioned to Visser that it was the third time that week Stockton had dined at the establishment, each time with a different young lady.

Replied Stockton, “What can I say? I like the chicken paprikash.”

■ BY NOW the events of Game 6 are as familiar as stops on the T. How do you get from Tiant to Fisk? You go through Lynn’s Crash, Carbo’s Homer, “No, No” Doyle and Evans’s Grab. Thirty-four players would get into the game, including 12 pitchers, eight of whom were used by Anderson.

The game reached the top of the ninth tied. It was 11:30 p.m., and 76 million people were watching the game

on NBC—35% of the U.S. population. Simmons and producer Roy Hammerman decided to have Kubek leave the broadcast booth and head to the Reds’ clubhouse, where he would conduct interviews in the event of a clinching victory. Coyle spoke to Garagiola: “Use Stockton as your color man.”

Neither Garagiola nor Stockton would mention on air that Kubek had left the booth for the clubhouse—at least not until the bottom of the 11th inning. They would do so then only because the NBC switchboard in New York City was lighting up with phone calls from viewers who were worried that something had happened to Kubek.

When the game headed to the 10th inning, Simmons, Coyle and Hammerman had another decision to make: Who should be the play-by-play man? There had been no contingency for extra innings. So they made one up on the fly: Stockton and Garagiola would alternate innings, with Stockton up first. It truly was his lucky night.

■ BOTTOM OF the 12th inning. Still tied, 6–6. It was an even-numbered inning, so it was Stockton’s.

Kubek left the Reds’ clubhouse and walked the concrete tunnel that connects the clubhouse to the visiting dugout. He saw Anderson, who had ducked into the tunnel to smoke a cigarette.

“Hey, you’ve been in this situation before,” the manager said to Kubek, who played in six World Series, four of which went seven games.

“No, I haven’t,” Kubek said. “Not like this.”

Anderson tilted his head toward the dugout steps. “Come on in,” he said.

Kubek had one foot on the bottom step of the Reds dugout as Fisk took the first pitch from Pat Darcy for a ball. Kubek could hear Anderson and Reds pitching coach Larry Shepard talk. “How many pitches has he thrown, Shep?” Anderson asked.

“Twenty-eight.”

“Damn. He ain’t thrown that many in weeks.”

The next thing Kubek heard was the crack of Fisk’s bat.

■ CARLTON FISK was born two months after the first World Series telecast, in 1947, when there were only about 100,000 television sets in the entire country. The director of the World Series did not own one. Coyle could not afford it. TV sets ran about \$500. Coyle made \$65 a week.



1975 WORLD SERIES

Fisk's upbringing in Charlestown may have begun just as the television era was dawning, but it played out not too differently from that of the townsfolk who were born in the Civil War days when St. Luke's was built. The son of Cecil and Leona Fisk grew up in a white clapboard farmhouse. Neighbor-

WAS "PURELY INSTINCT." ”

hood ball games were held in the Fisks' side yard. Cecil built a backstop using two wooden stakes and chicken wire. The kids used cow patties for bases. The really long home runs broke windows in the house across the road. And when the games ended, Leona would be ready with a basket of freshly baked cinnamon rolls and glasses of cold milk.

This time the baseball Fisk hit wasn't traveling toward the neighbor's window. It was heading for the foul pole above the Green Monster. And it was traveling very fast.

■ **THERE IT GOES!** A long drive. . . . If it stays fair. . . . *Home run!*"

And then Stockton did something nearly as memorable as the perfect clarity of his call: nothing. He and Garagiola stayed silent as Fisk rounded the bases, jumped on home plate and fell into the arms of fans and teammates. Stockton did not speak again until just before Fisk pushed his way into the Boston dugout. Finally he said, "We will have a seventh game in this 1975 World Series."

His tribute of silence lasted 36 seconds.

"I just did what I'm supposed to do," Stockton said. "There are two kinds of home runs: the drives that are deep and you can give a rhapsodic call—*It's way back . . . it could be gone*—and there are the ones like this one, and you have a nanosecond and it's going to be fair or foul and you have to get it right and you don't have much time to have much flourish on the call.

"The only thing that hit me was, 'If it stays fair. . . .' That was the key thing there. And after it was a home run, I just wanted to shut up. I wanted to make sure I'm not going to scream and yell. It was total instinct. I didn't know any better or any worse. I always felt the guy who invented that technique was Vin Scully. What's better than the sound and pictures? I wasn't aware of that technique at the time. It was purely instinct."

LOW PRESSURE, HIGH DRAMA

Rose waited through days of rain, Tiant started Game 6, and the Reds celebrated after Game 7 (opposite, from left), but the moment New Englanders remember best is Fisk's blast (below).



■ **AS FISK** dashed for home, zigzagging because of the humanity in his way, John Kiley knew just what to coax out of that monster Hammond X-66: Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." Hearing the X-66 was another pearl made possible by Stockton's 36 seconds of silence. You can hear Kiley, as if back in the ornate silent-movie palaces of the Hub, choose the perfect sound track as Fisk scored the last run of a long night. Later, when Fisk came back on the field to talk to Kubek and to bask in the adoration of fans who did not want to leave, Kiley broke into "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" and then "Give Me Some Men Who Are Stout-Hearted Men" and then "The Beer Barrel Polka" and then . . . well, then anything with a good beat to make the joy seem as if it could last forever.

■ **INSIDE THE TRUCK**, as the home run unfolded, Coyle stuck to The Bible: centerfield shot of the pitch, cut to the high home camera to follow the flight of the ball off the foul pole and to the ground, cut to a high third-base-side camera following Fisk as he rounds first and second, cut to a centerfield shot of the delirious fans standing and cheering behind the Boston dugout, cut back to the high third camera as Fisk rounds third base, cut to a low first base camera of the crowd and cut in time to see Fisk jump on home plate—six cuts in all.

Coyle showed his first replay one minute after the ball was hit. It was from the high third camera. It showed Fisk from behind, jumping after he knew the ball was a home run and then clapping his hands. Twenty seconds later Coyle punched up his

second replay: an angle down the line, toward the leftfield wall, that showed the ball hitting the screen attached to the foul pole. He cut back to live pictures, one from the high home camera showing the field and another from the high third camera that panned the crowd.

Around that time Simmons was standing in the back of the production truck, on the phone with NBC New York, coordinating the "throw"—the moment when the network switched from the coverage in Boston to programming that would follow. Suddenly his eyes found one of the many small monitors in a big wall in front of Coyle, one that was off to Coyle's side. "Look at that!" Simmons shouted. "What is that up there?"

It was the feed from the camera in the leftfield wall, the one Kubek had recommended for action at second base. This camera, a one-time placement, was not in Coyle's replay rotation; the feed from that camera wasn't even in the director's



1975 WORLD SERIES

line of vision. Alerted by Simmons, Coyle looked up. “Oh, my God,” he said. “Let’s take that.”

Coyle punched up the replay from the camera, which was operated by Lou Gerard. Two minutes and 11 seconds had passed since Fisk hit the home run. Finally the world saw it: an isolation shot of Fisk as the ball was in the air. Three times Fisk waved with his arms to his right, trying to semaphore the baseball fair. When he saw it hit the foul pole, Fisk jumped in delight and then jumped again. Coyle froze the shot on Fisk’s second jump.

In the NBC studios in New York, John Filippelli, a young desk assistant who was cutting highlights of the game and would later work side by side with Coyle as a producer, was struck by the sight of Fisk. “Wow, that’s the shot you remember,” Filippelli said. “It goes back to an adage I used many times: The way you document a game is almost as important as the game itself.”

“It was arguably one of the greatest replays of all time,” Weisman said. Thirty-four years later, speaking to author Mark Frost for his exquisite 2009 book, *Game Six*, Weisman revealed that it was Simmons, not Coyle, who deserved credit for noticing the Fisk reaction shot. But before doing so, Weisman spoke with Coyle’s widow about it. Coyle had died in 1996. Before Simmons died in 2010, Weisman had spoken to him and his wife, who, Weisman said, “thanked me for setting the record straight. She said, ‘You know Chet could never have told that story himself.’”

The record of the Game 6 telecast was not fully set, though. A whopper of a legend remained.

■ **THE LEGEND** goes like this: Gerard caught one of the most famous images in sports television history, the one that allegedly “invented” the reaction shot, only because a rat the size of a cat was at his feet and Gerard was too afraid to swing his camera to follow the flight of Fisk’s home run ball. The story of this happy accident has been told time and time again over 40 years.

But when Leggett visited Coyle at his New Jersey home the week after the World Series, Coyle said only that Gerard “was fighting off rats in there most of the night. He had to keep one eye on the game and another out for rats. When Fisk hit the ball toward leftfield, nobody could tell if it would be fair or foul, so it was great for us when one of our cameras got a good shot of it hitting the pole.” Coyle did not say that Gerard had broken from *The Bible* to stay on Fisk because a rat appeared. But over subsequent years, and with increased fervor,

the director and the cameraman delighted in telling that tale.

“Wink, wink,” said Weisman. “First it was a rat by his foot, then after a couple of years it was a rat on his shoulder, and then it was a rat under his hat eating a ham sandwich. . . . Just one of the rumors and the wives’ tales and the exaggerations that came out of the game.”

If Gerard really was supposed to stay on the action, how could a camera inside the leftfield wall follow the flight of a baseball hitting the leftfield foul pole? And the shot from the high third camera of Fisk jumping—Coyle’s first replay—wasn’t that a reaction shot? And going all the way back to Coyle’s first World Series, in 1947, wasn’t the shot of Joe DiMaggio kicking the dirt after getting robbed by Al Gionfriddo a reaction shot?

“I don’t think you can say it was the first [reaction shot],”

Weisman said of the Fisk image. “I think you can say it popularized it. It made it more important to show people’s emotions and reactions away from the ball. That was raw emotion from Fisk. It made you smile. It was inarguable after that about showing the thrill of victory.”

FAIR, BUT NEVER GONE
In 2005 the Red Sox made Fisk’s legacy official by naming Fenway’s leftfield pole after the catcher.



■ **ANDERSON FELT TERRIBLE** after Game 6. He thought his pitching moves had doomed his club. He saw Rose and Johnny Bench in that tiny visitors’ clubhouse and barked, “Big Red Machine, my ass.”

“Sparky, relax,” Rose said. “Did you see that celebration they had? We got ‘em right where we want them. We just played in one of the greatest games ever. Don’t worry. We’ll win tomorrow.”

The Reds did win Game 7 the next night. It was the highest-rated telecast to date, and has been exceeded only

by Game 6 of the 1980 Series. “More surprising than the huge numbers for the seventh game is the fact that they occurred during prime evening hours, when viewers supposedly prefer situation comedies, dramatic series and variety shows to sports,” Leggett wrote. “Sponsors, promoters and the networks will have to rethink their old assumptions about baseball and prime-time sports telecasts.”

Kuhn crowed in his book that Fisk’s home run would not have had nearly the same impact if he had hit it at 4:30 on a weekday afternoon, as the pressmen would have had it. Said Weisman, “I guarantee the ratings for Game 6 grew the longer that game went on. If that game in 1975 was a blowout or didn’t go extra innings, who knows what would have happened. But it really saved baseball. Madison Avenue bought in.”

There was no going back. NBC asked Kuhn for a fourth night game in the next World Series. The commissioner granted it

“on an experimental basis,” scheduling Game 2 as the first weekend night game in Series history. It was held in frigid weather in Cincinnati. Comically, Kuhn watched the game without an overcoat but with long johns underneath his suit. Before the game, Yogi Berra, a Yankees coach, snapped, “What are we playin’ for? The championship of Nielsen?” By ’85 the World Series had become an all-prime-time event.

Game 6 in 1975 ignited a revival of baseball that would last more than a decade, something Anderson seemed to understand even as he left Fenway after Game 7. “We didn’t win the World Series,” the skipper said. “Baseball did.”

Attendance rose 5% in 1976, *Monday Night Baseball* ratings went up 19% and All-Star Game ratings went up 28%. The next television contract, signed in 1979, doubled baseball’s annual take from the networks. The 10 highest-rated World Series all occurred in the window of 1971–86.

(The period of remarkable growth was also ignited by another event, two months after Fisk hit his home run: a ruling that ended baseball’s reserve clause and paved the way for free agency. The average salary in 1975 was \$45,000. By ’78 it was \$100,000.)

Televised sports quickly became not only a prime-time fixture but also an all-the-time fixture. Four years after the 1975 World Series, Simmons left NBC to help launch and lead ESPN, taking Connal with him. Weisman went on to become one of the greatest sports producers in the industry and now oversees MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*. Stockton was in demand after the ’75 Series: NBC hired him to call NFL games, and two years later he moved to CBS, where he became the network’s lead basketball broadcaster. Forty years later he can hardly walk through an airport without someone recognizing him and saying, “If it stays fair. . . .”

“I’ve been blessed to call some great events over the years,” Stockton said. “That remains No. 1. Nothing has ever surpassed it.”

In 1998, *TV Guide* ranked the Fisk home run as the top moment in the history of televised sports. Since then the reaction shot has often replaced the action shot as how we best remember a great moment: Gibson pumping his fist as he rounds the bases, Carter leaping near first base, Gonzalez with his arms raised, Freese spiking his helmet between his legs, Bautista flipping his bat. . . .

Coyle made sure it would be that way. After the 1975 Series he made a rare amendment to Harry’s Bible: camera operators heretofore were instructed to stay on their shots for another five seconds after the play ended. “After this game,” Weisman said, “it went from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The edict was to stay for the reaction.”

The image of Fisk waving the ball fair instantly became more powerful than the home run itself. Change that night was as clear as the bells of St. Luke’s. We would never look at sports on TV the same way again. □

If You Own a Taurus Pistol A Settlement Has Been Proposed in a Class Action Lawsuit that Alleges Safety Defects

**The Settlement Provides an Enhanced Warranty,
Safety Training, and a Cash Payment for Returned Pistols**

*The United States District Court
for the Southern District of Florida authorized this notice.*

*Para una notificación en Español, visitar
www.TaurusCarterSettlement.com*

WHAT’S THIS ABOUT?

There is a proposed class action settlement about alleged safety defects in certain Taurus-branded pistols. This lawsuit alleges that Class Pistols (defined below) may unintentionally fire with the safety in the “on” or “safe” position, and may unintentionally fire when dropped or bumped. The Taurus Companies¹ (“Taurus”) stand by the Class Pistols and deny all allegations of wrongdoing and liability.

WHO’S INCLUDED?

You may be a Settlement Class Member and have rights under this settlement if you are a resident or entity of the United States, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, or Guam and own one or more of the following Taurus-branded firearms on July 30, 2015: PT-111 Millennium; PT-132 Millennium; PT-138 Millennium; PT-140 Millennium; PT-145 Millennium; PT-745 Millennium; PT-609; PT-640; and PT-24/7 (the “Class Pistols”).² The settlement doesn’t include Taurus G2 model pistols.

WHAT DOES THE SETTLEMENT PROVIDE?

Settlement Class Members may return their Class Pistol to Taurus (with shipping paid by Taurus) and receive up to \$200 per pistol, depending on the total number returned, not to exceed \$30 million. The exact payment amount will be determined after the return deadline has passed and the exact number of returned Class Pistols is known. If you return your Class Pistol for a payment, it will not be returned to you even if the payment is less than you want.

Also, Taurus will provide a free, transferrable lifetime enhanced warranty that will allow owners to submit warranty claims at any time. Taurus will pay shipping and inspection costs, and will repair or replace the pistol as necessary. Taurus will also provide safety training to all Settlement Class Members. Taurus will pay for notice and administration, a class representative award of up to \$15,000, and Class Counsels’ attorneys’ fees and costs up to \$9 million, payable over 4 years.

HOW DO YOU ASK FOR A PAYMENT?

You must submit a claim form and return your Class Pistol to receive a payment. Shipping is prepaid by Taurus. You can only submit a claim form *after* the settlement is finally approved and any appeals are concluded. This date is not yet known. You may register now through the website to get information about when you can submit a claim form. Visit the website to determine when you can submit a claim. If the Court approves the settlement and there are no appeals, the claims period will run from approximately February 24, 2016 until June 23, 2016.

WHAT ARE YOUR OTHER OPTIONS?

If you don’t want to be bound by the settlement, you must exclude yourself by **December 14, 2015**, or you won’t be able to sue, or continue to sue, Taurus about the legal claims in this case. If you exclude yourself, you can’t get money from this settlement. You may object to this settlement by sending an objection by **December 14, 2015** and you may have to give a deposition. Objections and opt-outs will be public record, even if they contain the identity of Settlement Class Members. Detailed information is on the website. If you do nothing, you will still receive the lifetime enhanced warranty and safety training but will not receive a payment, and you will still be bound by the settlement.

Before money is paid, the Court will hold a Final Approval hearing on **January 20, 2016**, to consider whether to approve the settlement. You may attend the hearing, but you don’t have to. The Court will also consider the request for attorneys’ fees and costs and an incentive award. The motion for attorneys’ fees, costs and awards will be on the website.

This is only a Summary. For detailed information, call toll-free 1-(844) 528-0180, or visit www.TaurusCarterSettlement.com, or write to Carter v. Forjas Taurus, c/o Heffler Claims Group, P.O. Box 230, Philadelphia, PA 19107-0230.

¹The “Taurus Companies” means Forjas Taurus, S.A., Taurus Holdings, Inc. and Taurus International Manufacturing, Inc. The Taurus Companies are the Defendants in the class action lawsuit.

²The “PRO” series of each model is included.

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A LEGEND AND LEGACY FOR ALL TIME

At a star-studded event at the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, KY, on October 1, **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED** honored Ali for his achievements in and out of the ring by dedicating an award in his honor, the Sports Illustrated Muhammad Ali Legacy Award.

The celebration, held on the 40th anniversary of the epic Thrilla in Manila, featured a retrospective of The Greatest's career, as well as special appearances by George Foreman, Shaquille O'Neal, Larry Holmes, Louisville mayor Greg Fischer, Ali's wife, Lonnie, and a reminiscence by former SI senior writer William Nack, who covered Ali in his prime.

Sports Illustrated was proud to team up on the dedication with Under Armour, which showcased its performance collection inspired by Muhammad Ali at the event. The global performance brand recently announced a long-term partnership with The Champ, celebrating his unyielding will as an athlete and humanitarian.

In December, at the same time SI announces its annual Sportsman of the Year honor, the Sports Illustrated Muhammad Ali Legacy Award will be presented to an icon in sports whose dedication to the ideals of sportsmanship has spanned decades and whose career in athletics has directly or indirectly impacted the world. Only two individuals have previously received the Legacy Award: Eunice Kennedy Shriver, founder and driving force behind the Special Olympics, in 2008, and Earvin (Magic) Johnson, in 2014, when he was honored for his work as an entrepreneur, philanthropist and social and political activist.



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1. BOXING LEGENDS LARRY HOLMES, MUHAMMAD ALI, GEORGE FOREMAN
2. UNDER ARMOUR TEAM: KENDALL OGLE, JASMINE MAIETTA, ARI RATNER, ERNIE TALBERT, SARAH MAGNUSON, JACQUELINE PRESS AND ERIC OGBOGU
3. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED GROUP EDITOR PAUL FICHTENBAUM, LONNIE ALI, SHAQUILLE O'NEAL WITH THE AWARD
4. UNDER ARMOUR DIRECTOR OF SPORTS MARKETING ERIC OGBOGU
5. GEORGE FOREMAN ON THE RED CARPET
6. SHAQUILLE O'NEAL AND MUHAMMAD ALI
7. MAYOR OF LOUISVILLE GREG FISCHER WELCOMING GUESTS
8. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED GROUP EDITOR PAUL FICHTENBAUM DEDICATING THE AWARD



No Regrets... I Swear

→ BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

IN JUNE, Stan Van Gundy watched the Warriors win the NBA title. Well, O.K.: A lot of us watched the Warriors win the title. The difference with Van Gundy is that he probably could have been their coach.

In the spring of 2014, Golden State was looking for a coach, and was widely believed to want Van Gundy. He was never officially offered the job, but that's probably because he pulled out when Pistons owner Tom Gores offered him full control of that franchise: a dual role as coach and team president.

What happened next?

Well, last year the Pistons started 5–23 and their season was essentially over by Christmas.

The Warriors finished 83–20.

So you could forgive Van Gundy if he watched the Finals with a mouth full of bile and a belly full of tequila. But he swears from Michigan to California he doesn't think that way.

"No, no, no," he said earlier this month inside the Pistons' practice facility. "Not at all. I love where I am. I love the people I'm working for. My owner is fabulous. Tremendous amount of support in every way imaginable. . . . I couldn't ask for a better situation."

We love what-if scenarios in sports, and the NBA is the ultimate what-if league. What if the Trail Blazers had drafted Michael Jordan instead of Sam Bowie, or Kevin Durant instead of Greg Oden? What if David Stern had allowed the Lakers to trade for Chris Paul? What if LeBron James had never left Cleveland?

Van Gundy's what-if is not his alone. When he chose Detroit, he started a chain reaction that could affect the league for a decade. Golden State turned to Steve Kerr, who had never coached before. Kerr was all set to coach the Knicks when the Warriors called. He chose Golden State. And so New York's new czar, Phil Jackson, turned to Derek Fisher.

This reminds me of an ancient Chinese proverb: Things usually work out for the best, unless you're the Knicks. Fisher struggled with a lousy roster and the demands of this country's media capital. Kerr did a "fabulous job"—those are Van Gundy's words—turning the Warriors into one of the great teams of the last 20 years.

The NBA
is full of
intriguing
what-if
scenarios.

What if
the Blazers
drafted
Jordan?
What if
LeBron
never left
Cleveland?
What if
Stan
Van Gundy
coached the
Warriors?



Which of last
season's losing
NBA teams
will make the
playoffs?

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"Steve did a great job there," Van Gundy says. "If I had it to do over, this is where I'd want to be."

Van Gundy's team missed the playoffs, but he got what he wanted anyway, because he is in charge. For Van Gundy—56 years old and coaching his third NBA team—"full control" is not about ego gratification. It isn't even about making all the decisions, because a coach doesn't really have time to do that. But he got to hire his general manager, Jeff Bower, and set a direction for an organization. Van Gundy can make sure everybody is on the same page—and he gets to choose the page.

If you watch the Pistons closely—and I'm guessing most of you don't—you'll see a promising young core of center Andre Drummond, rookie forward Stanley Johnson, shooting guard Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and point guard Reggie Jackson. Nobody is handing out rings to that crew anytime soon. But at least when the Detroit fans look for reasons to believe, they can point to actual players, not just lottery Ping-Pong balls.

You'll also see that coaching is not just about the record at the end of the year. It's about how you get there. There are only 30 NBA teams. The opportunity to build one of them is irresistible to a coaching lifer like Van Gundy.

To most fans the lasting memory of Van Gundy is the image of him swigging Diet Pepsi while casually telling the media in 2012 that his star in Orlando, Dwight Howard, tried to get him fired. It was a moving picture of organizational dysfunction. Whatever happens in Detroit, you won't see that.

There are no guarantees with the Pistons, but then, there were no guarantees with the Warriors last year. Kerr was handed a very good team, and he helped make it a champion. Perhaps Stan Van Gundy would have done that too. He will never know. He doesn't seem to care. □



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